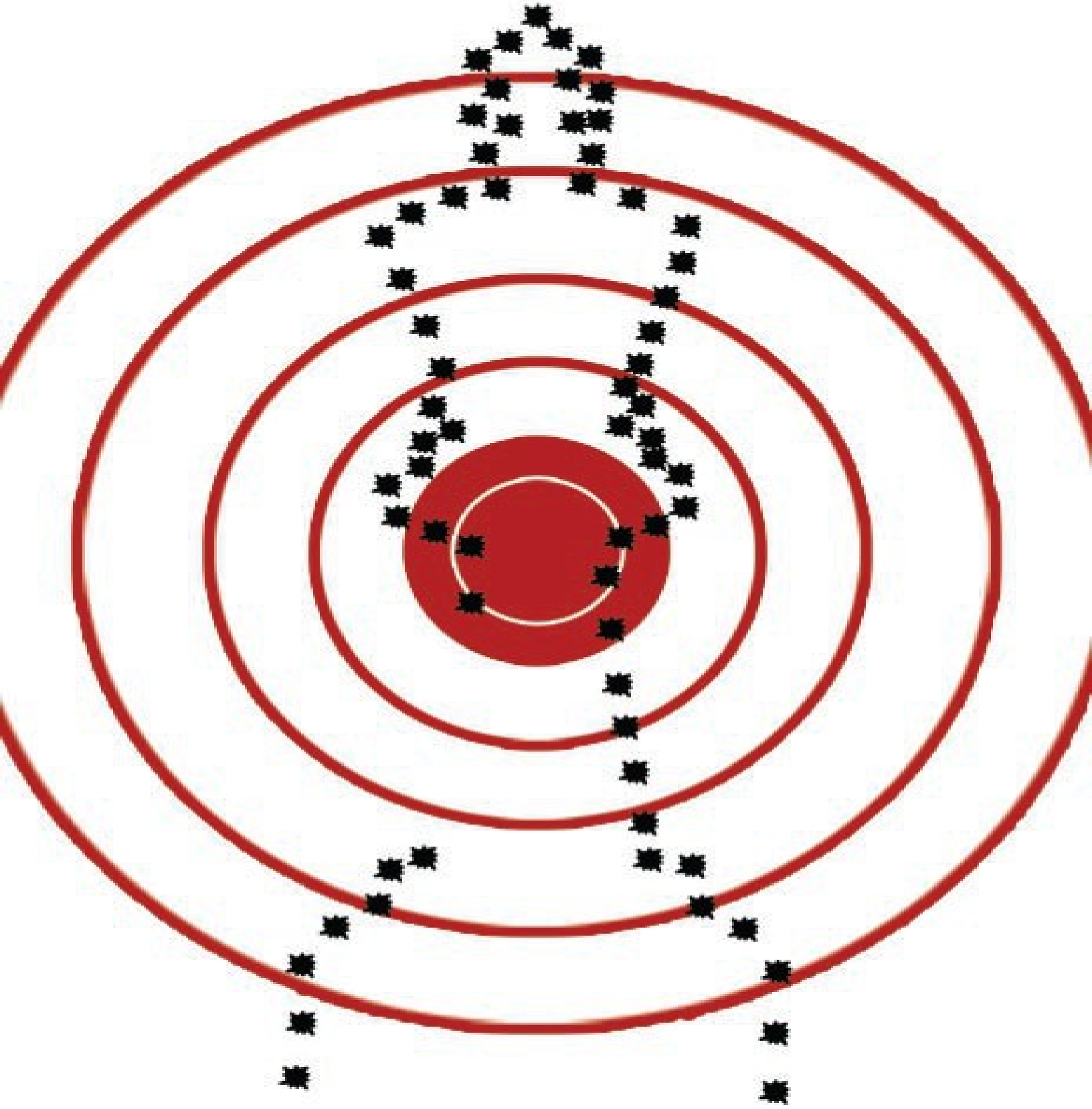
Bullet Chess

One Minute to Mate



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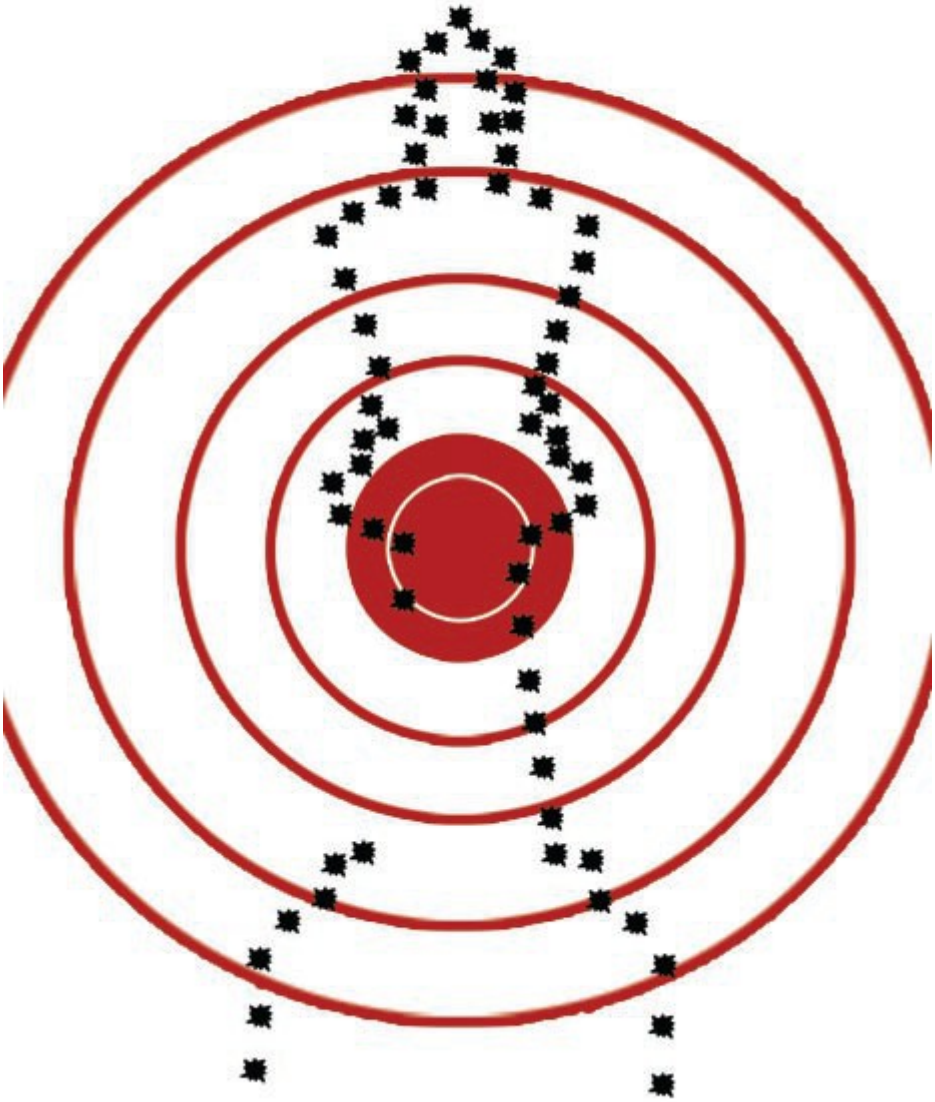

Bullet Chess

One Minute to Mate

by

Hikaru Nakamura
&
Bruce Harper

Foreword by Yasser Seirawan

2009
Russell Enterprises, Inc.
Milford, CT USA

Bullet Chess: One Minute to Mate by
Hikaru Nakamura & Bruce Harper

ISBN: 978-1-888690-67-5

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Published by:
Russell Enterprises, Inc.
P.O. Box 3131
Milford, CT 06460 USA

http://www.russell-enterprises.com
info@russell-enterprises.com

Cover design by Janel Lowrance

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Foreword

My introduction to chess likely mirrored that of most American chess players: after learning the movements of the pieces and basic rules of the game I wanted to *play* as soon and as quickly as possible. No learning how to mate with the two bishops versus lone king, king triangulations or back-rank mates for me. No sir, I wanted to play! After being routinely clobbered by my chess teacher I soon graduated to club play or, in my case, to "coffee-house chess." After all, my "club" was indeed a coffee-shop in the university district of Seattle Washington called *The Last Exit*. *The Exit* was a magnet for Seattle's best players and it was there that I developed a close circle of friends. We would play "five-minute" or "blitz" chess and wile away the afternoon and evening hours. Some in my circle were more adventurous and we would accelerate our tempo of play to "three-minute chess" and even "one-minute" or "bullet" games.

Bullet was a great deal of fun, and as I was fast but not good, it was an attractive way to spend the day. I fancied myself at such speeds, as I had excellent hand and eye coordination and could get fifty and even sixty moves "in" before the flag on my clock would fall. There were several obvious drawbacks to physical bullet games: even among the very best players, time scrambles at the very end of the games would inevitably lead to pieces being literally "dropped" onto wrong squares, pieces sliding beyond the intended square, hands colliding in mid-air leading to even more dropped pieces, pieces either falling – or flying – off the table, and scrambles to recover or replace the missing-in-battle would be interchanged with the inevitable illegal move...

Because our bullet games were played with a friendly banter, such issues didn't really bother us and we simply continued, even if we felt cheated with an undeserved loss or two.

Because bullet games were so difficult to control physically, before too long we reverted back to regular speeds of three- and five-minute games. Still, the lure of bullet remained great because these games were so much *fun* and I often played to exhaustion!

While many lengthy musings were given to the idea of being able to "control" bullet games, such as not allowing the clock to be pressed until the piece was righted on a square; or requiring that illegal moves be pointed out immediately or else were allowed to stand, no one ever really came up with a completely satisfactory solution for controlling piece and hand movements. Nonetheless, for my whole chess career, I've enjoyed bullet games.

Then along came the internet and chess servers and bullet chess was changed forever. At last, a way of controlling the input of moves had been devised. No more pieces landing on the wrong square, hand collisions or illegal moves. Now it was about good play and of course mouse-inputting speeds! The fun of bullet chess could be enjoyed around the world at any time of the day.

Bullet chess has mostly lurked on the periphery of mainstream tournament play. While attending major open events, it is common to see players blitzing and playing bullet in the hallways and corridors waiting for the rounds to start. For the quick of eye and hand, as well as the tactically gifted, bullet is an endless source of fun.

To my knowledge there has never been a book devoted to serious bullet play (if I may use an oxymoron), which is why I eagerly undertook the assignment to write this foreword to this work by FIDE Master Bruce Harper and grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura. Hikaru (or “H-Bomb” as he is known) is a bullet legend on internet chess servers around the world. His bullet skills are simply extraordinary, and watching him play is a marvelous, and at times jaw-dropping, experience. He is that good.

Drawing from his games and the games of others, his experiences and how he thinks about bullet, the reader is welcomed into a fascinating parallel universe of the chess world. It is not to everyone’s liking, and indeed former world champion Mikhail Botvinnik would turn over in his grave to see such a young talent as Hikaru championing bullet. But it doesn’t seem to have hurt Hikaru’s “real” chess results, to put it mildly, and bullet is fun and addictive. And yes, bullet *can* help you in your tournament games, as ideas are reinforced, helping with your calculation during tournament play.

A few summers ago, when American grandmaster Larry Christiansen and his wife Natasha came to spend a couple weeks at our home in Amsterdam, one of the first stories Larry told me by way of our catching up was with what happened to his laptop. To paraphrase, *“I was playing bullet and played a really sweet game building up a nice mating attack, suddenly I had to rush my move and ^*x%#@ed it up and lost on time before I could mate. I was so mad! I meant to smash my fist onto the table in disgust but somehow caught the top end of my laptop and smashed it down. The top met bottom with a crash. Uh-oh... I broke my screen, wrecking my $2,000 state of the art little friend...”* We both fell into a good laugh. Every bullet player knows the story only too well. (Hopefully not all of us have destroyed our computers. I’ve managed to avoid that trap. So far.) Enjoying Larry’s works

such as *Storming the Ramparts*, Larry cites a number of his bullet games, explaining how a typical bullet mating pattern helped him pull off a coup.

Bullet players should really understand this above all else: play bullet for fun! It behooves us if we are serious about our bullet skills to give a bit more thought to bullet and how to improve our play. Time management is crucial: in bullet a bad move is indeed better then no move at all! The initiative is far more important than material. King safety is of paramount importance as it allows you to play quickly, free of concerns about mating attacks.

What bullet really teaches us is pattern recognition. Specifically, mating and tactical patterns that win material. All these themes are chapters in this work and critical components of playing bullet successfully. This book was written with an emphasis on enjoyment and fun. I suspect that you, dear reader, will be treated to more blunders in one book than you'll find in a hundred others combined. A record not meant to be broken.

Certainly this book will *not* teach you to be as good as Hikaru, but it will teach you to be a sharper tactician and a much stronger bullet player.

Enjoy!

Yasser Seirawan
Amsterdam
August 2009

Introduction

The idea of a book about one-minute ("bullet") chess was first conceived in the spring of 2008, when American grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura visited Vancouver, British Columbia.

At the time, few members of the Internet Chess Club were unaware of the exploits of "Smallville," the principal handle used by grandmaster Nakamura. His domination of the other ICC bullet players was astounding – several hundred rating points separated him from his "rivals." if such a term can be used in this context. As all chess players know, someone always has to win in the end, but the Smallville phenomenon defied common sense.

In contrast, the other author of this book, FM Bruce Harper, was a late-comer to bullet chess. An entire game of chess in two minutes or less? What's that all about? How could it even be possible?

This book is the result of the fortuitous meeting of a formidable grandmaster who is arguably the strongest bullet player in the world and a novice bullet player who just happened to be idle after completing his first chess book (*Chess on the Edge*, the three-volume chess biography of Canadian grandmaster Duncan Suttles). Hopefully it makes sense of a form of chess that, at first blush, seems impossibly nonsensical.

While all the mistakes in this book are those of the authors, it goes without saying that this book could not have been written without help and encouragement from others. We thank *ChessCafe's* Hanon Russell for his enthusiasm and support for a novel venture, while former Canadian Junior

Champion Tyler Johnson contributed many of the games (both good and bad!) found in the following pages.

Finally, no book can fully realize its potential, whatever that might be, without a skilled and ruthless copy editor. We thank Robin Perelle for taking time from her professional editing duties to squeeze the errors, verbosity and superfluous commas out of this book – her mastery of language is exceeded only by her ignorance of chess. And we thank Robin Harper for providing that extra set of non-chess eyes which found the errors we had all missed.

And with that, we invite the reader to enter the exhilarating, irrational and thoroughly fun world of bullet chess.

Hikaru Nakamura
Bruce Harper
Vancouver, British Columbia
August 2009

Chapter 1

What is Bullet Chess?

Experienced bullet players will likely spend less than a minute on this chapter, but that's the whole idea of bullet chess, isn't it?

What is "bullet chess"?

In this book, we use the term "bullet chess" interchangeably with the more awkward term "one-minute chess." At the Internet Chess Club, however, "bullet" is used to describe any game with less than three minutes per player, while "blitz" is used for games with between three minutes and 15 minutes per player.

Isn't one minute fast?

Yes, it is.

Is bullet still chess?

Of course not!

This is the fundamental truth about bullet chess that many players fail to understand. Bullet is certainly a form of chess, and much of what you've learned about chess applies to bullet, but bullet should never be confused with conventional chess itself!

When non-bullet players scoff "it's not chess!" the correct response from a bullet player is "who said it was?"

Then why play bullet?

Because it's fun!

Why aren't there any books on bullet chess?

Bullet chess is a fairly recent development, so it's not surprising that no one has written a book on it. In any case, in-depth analysis of one-minute games seems like an absurdity, and what else can you do in a chess book?

But if you can't analyze the games, what can you write about?

First of all, absurd or not, we *do* analyze bullet games in this book, although we hope we are not too critical. Bullet is hard to play, and even harder to play well. Apart from analyzing the positions on the chess board, we also try to explain how bullet differs from normal chess and how understanding these differences can improve your bullet play.

It is important to realize that bullet chess is not really about "truth," to the extent that some chess players use the term to refer to the objectively best moves, but rather whatever works. Bullet chess won't often help you in your search for "chess truth," although it will certainly help you learn how to play chess more quickly! But bullet chess will teach you a lot about chess psychology, as there is always a reason that any particular move is played. It may not be a good reason, and it may not have much to do with the actual position, but there is always a reason. In this book, we explore the reasons why players do what they do when they are short of time, especially when it comes to making mistakes.

While we will often discuss moves and variations in the pages to follow, it will always be with an eye to the clock, because that's what bullet chess is

all about.

A few ground rules

In the rest of this book, “bullet chess” will often be referred to simply as “bullet.”

For both complete games and game fragments, we have identified the players only by rating. One of the attractions of internet bullet is anonymity, and we have protected our sources. It isn’t giving away much, however, to reveal that where one player’s rating is over 2800, it is one of the authors.

All games in this book were bullet games, with each player having one minute for the entire game. The games were played at the Internet Chess Club (www.chessclub.com).

Any critical comments in our annotations are purely for instructional purposes.

Chapter 2

Why Bullet Is Fun

Having explained what bullet chess is, we now turn to a more important question – why would anyone play it?

The public image of chess is of a dignified, quiet game played by either elderly gentlemen or deep thinkers (the evil genius Kronstein in *From Russia with Love* comes to mind). Chess is always thought to be a hard, slightly scary game where *thought* is required. The sedate, contemplative nature of chess is embedded in the popular consciousness.

Thought, of course, requires time, and the idea of playing an entire game of chess in no more than two minutes strikes most non-players as absurd, then impossible. It is just too much at odds with their image of the game.

Many chess players have the same reaction. They (correctly) think “but that’s not chess,” and then (usually incorrectly) think “I could never do that.”

This reaction is consistent with what we know about the psychology of chess players. Naturally enough, almost every chess player aspires to play perfect, error-free chess (although no one can), but they don’t realize that if everyone did the result would be dreary, boring games. Some argue that top-level chess has already reached this stage.

Chess is a game of mistakes, and it is understandable that many chess players instinctively shy away from playing a version of chess which is guaranteed to lead to mistakes – and often very bad ones. With only one

minute for the game, both sides are almost sure to blunder, and so the illusion of possible perfection is gone before the first move is made.

Players who balk at playing one-minute chess are failing to see the whole picture. They shouldn't be worrying that they will make more mistakes – they should be rubbing their hands in glee at the thought of all the mistakes their opponents will make.

With this in mind, let's look at some of the reasons we think bullet chess is fun.

It doesn't matter if you lose

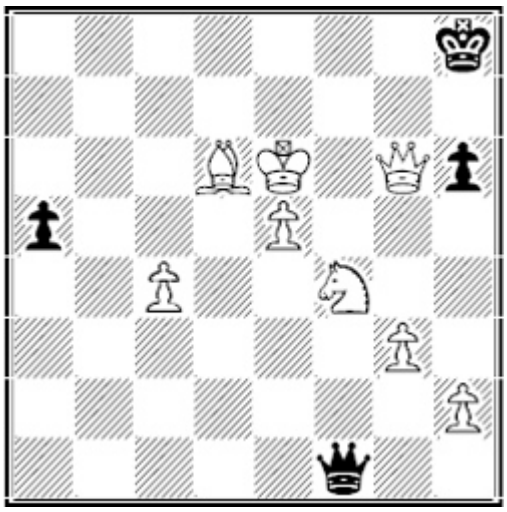
People play chess for all sorts of reasons, but most players would rather win than lose. The beauty of bullet is that *it doesn't matter* if you lose! Since bullet isn't serious chess, it really doesn't matter, even in chess terms. Bullet is purely for fun, and people who think it's more than that have other issues they might consider addressing.

You always have a chance

In slower games, if you lose even a pawn to a grandmaster you are probably toast (these days that depends on who the grandmaster is, but you get the idea). In bullet, on the other hand, there is always a chance to pull off a miracle.

The following examples illustrate the important point than in bullet there is always hope.

White (1878) – Black (2068) [A00]



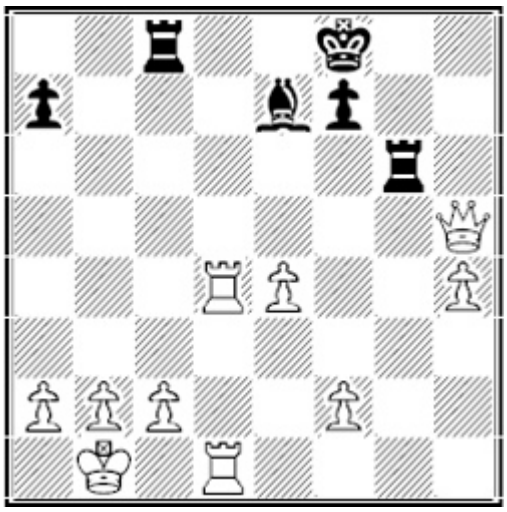
After a chaotic battle featuring intense hand-to-hand combat and an exciting kingwalk, White's attack has won out. With five seconds left, against his opponent's four seconds, it is almost inconceivable that White could lose. For example, 42.Qe8+ Kg7/h7 43.Qf7+ Kh8 44.Ng6 is mate, all with check.

But with the game destined to end in less than ten seconds, one way or the other, there is no point in Black giving up. In any case, no one ever won a game by resigning, and it turns out that White contrives to lose in what is probably the only legal helpmate in the position: **42.Q×h6+?! Kg8 43.Ng6? Qf7 mate 0-1**

If you think this sort of thing is rare, you either have never played bullet or you resign too quickly! It is almost certain that at this exact moment someone is blowing a "completely winning position" in a bullet game.

Here is another startling example, where the culprit had considerably more time than in the previous example.

White (2128) – Black (1934) [A00]



White has a massive advantage and cannot possibly lose – at least, one wouldn't think so. There are only two dark clouds on the horizon. The first is that White has 10 seconds left, to Black's 21 seconds. The second is that White was on game 85 of a 191-game bullet binge. This might account for what happens next.

29...Rb6!

Black courageously plays on, ignoring White's threats. Only in this book could a move which allows mate in one be given an exclamation mark!

30.Qf5?

Missing 30.Qh8 mate, which would have deprived us of what follows.

30...Rcb8 31.Rd7

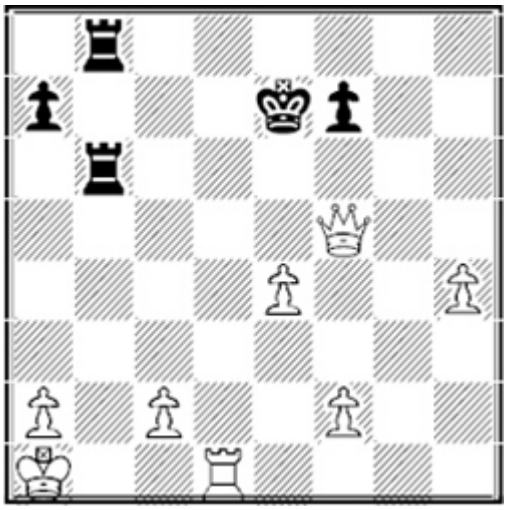
31.b3 was a bit safer, but of course White is still winning.

31...R×b2+ 32.Ka1 R2b6 33.R×e7!

With six seconds left, White finds a powerful blow which destroys Black's defenses. It's always fun to write things like that.

If White had only a second or two left, then Black might survive by playing 33...Rb1+, which would delay mate by several moves and possibly cause White to lose on time. But here, with White still having six seconds left, 33...Rb1+ wouldn't accomplish much.

33...K×e7



34.Rd8?

A mouse slip! Black's persistence is now rewarded. White's intended 34.Rd7+ mated in two moves.

34...R×d8?

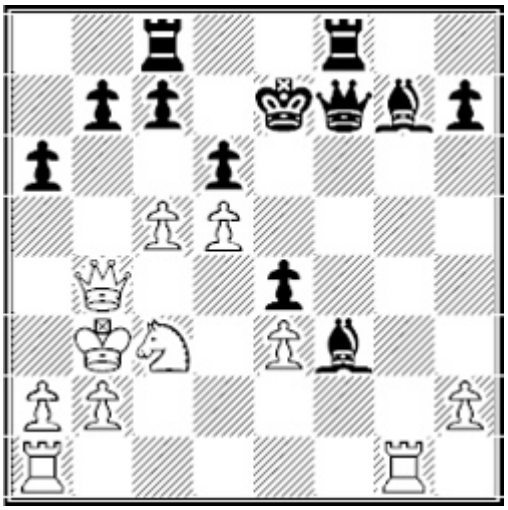
Overcome by happiness, Black grabs White's unfortunate rook, missing 34...**R**b1 mate! But with 12 seconds left, against White's five seconds, his chances of winning are pretty good anyway.

35.Qe5+ Kf8 36.Qh8+ Ke7 37.Qe5+ Kd7 38.Qf5+ Kc7 39.Q×f7+ Kc6 0-1

White lost on time.

In the previous game, White at least had the excuse of being behind on time when he blew his winning position. In the next example, Black can only blame himself.

White (1953) – Black (1881) [A42]



White's opening has malfunctioned and he has arrived in a completely lost position. With 11 seconds left, he launches a desperate counterattack.

25.Q×b7!? B×c3?

With a colossal 17 seconds on his clock, Black has no excuse for not finding 25...Rb8, which wins White's queen and ends his hopes.

26.c×d6+ K×d6 27.Qc6+ Ke5?

Walking into mate, with 14 seconds left. After 27...Ke7 Black is still winning.

28.K×c3?

Missing 28.Rg5+.

28...Qf6?

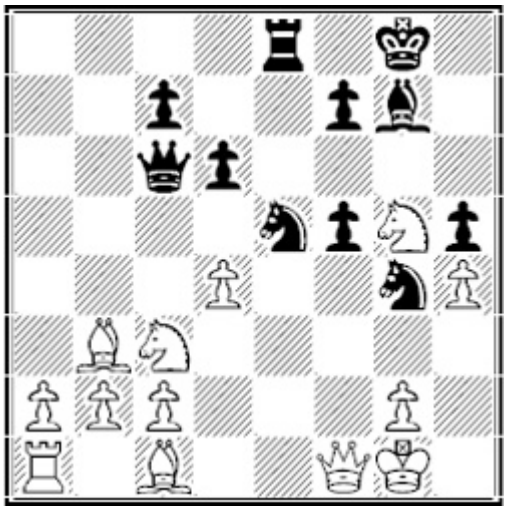
Black, determined to lose, allows the mate White just missed.

29.Rg5+! Q×g5 30.Qe6 mate 1-0

With three seconds to spare.

The next example is a bit more complicated, but it serves to remind us once again that in bullet chess no position is so good that it can't be wrecked – or salvaged, depending on how you look at it.

White (1894) – Black (1819) [B06]



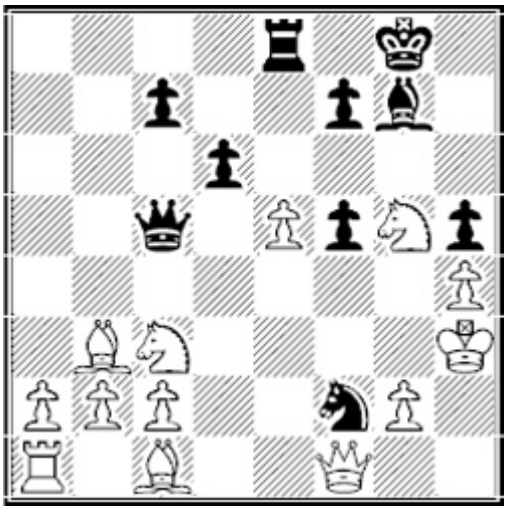
After a badly played first 18 moves, Black has a nearly hopeless position. “Nearly” because White has 18 seconds left, while Black has 35 seconds remaining. Black, remembering that few positions are completely hopeless, plays on.

19.d×e5?

White took three seconds to make this dangerous capture, which opens the g1–a7 diagonal and gives Black some hope of counterplay.

After the stronger (and less greedy) 19.Q×f5!, Black could give in to despair with a clear conscience.

19...Qc5+ 20.Kh1 Nf2+ 21.Kh2 Ng4+ 22.Kh3 Nf2+



23.Kg3

With less than ten seconds remaining, White plays for the win. This somewhat impractical decision was likely made more with his heart than his head, because after Black’s obvious response...

23...B×e5+

...White blunders horribly.

24.Bf4? Qe3+

24...B×f4+! 25.K×f4 Qe5+ 36. Kf3 Qe3 was mate, although the move played wins as well.

25.Nf3

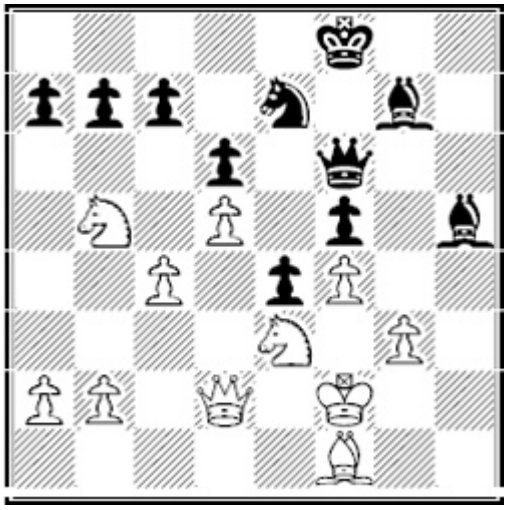
After 25.Kh2, White still gets mated.

25...B×f4 mate 0-1

Often players exchange mistakes, especially when time grows short, the position is complicated and both sides are attacking. Before we are done, we will look at many games where the players attack on opposite wings, but the play is even trickier when pieces both attack and defend at the same time, as it can be difficult for players to recognize this duality.

When a seemingly powerful attacking move turns out to inadvertently unhinge a player's own defenses, entertaining play can result.

White (1882) – Black (2040) [A04]



White has just played 30.Nb5, initiating an attack on the queenside. Black thought for some time and decided against 30...Q×b2, which more or less holds the balance, and instead opts to begin a speculative attack which just gets him in trouble.

30...Qh6?! 31.N×c7

Now White stands better, because once his knight gets to e6, he will have an attack. Each player has 27 seconds left.

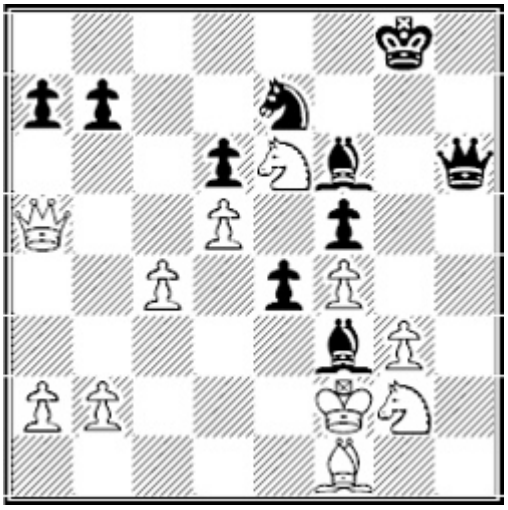
31...Bf3?

Black is firing blanks, but the objectively stronger 31...Kf7, covering e6, was not what he had in mind.

32.Ne6+ Kg8 33.Ng2

The immediate 33.Qa5! was strong too, but Black is not going to retreat, so it comes out the same.

33...Bf6 34.Qa5!



34...Kf7

Black thought for nine seconds (!) on this move and realized: 1) he has no attack; and 2) White *does* have an attack, and a strong one at that.

35.Qd8?!

The seemingly greedy and unprincipled 35.Q×a7 was safer, but White undoubtedly remembered the principle that you shouldn't go pawn hunting with your queen. Here, though, his king is perfectly safe, and on a7, White's queen would even help control the g1-a7 diagonal.

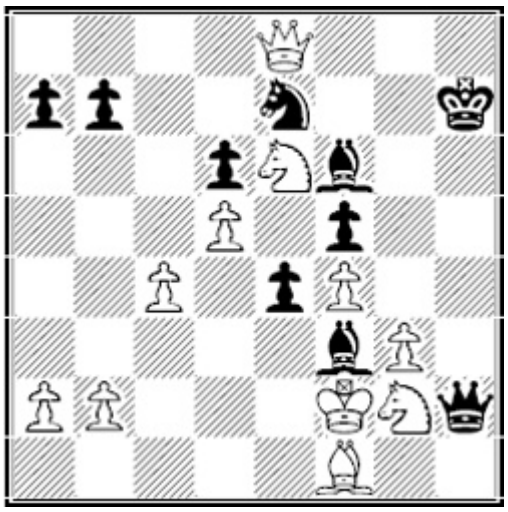
35...Qh2?

By spending another five seconds for this shot in the dark, Black leaves himself with only nine seconds, against White's 20 seconds. To make things worse, 35...N×d5! would have put Black back in the game, but he overlooks this opportunity.

36.Qf8+ Kg6 37.Qe8+!

The six seconds White took to find this deadly move was well spent, as now Black's defenses collapse. White has 11 seconds left; Black eight seconds.

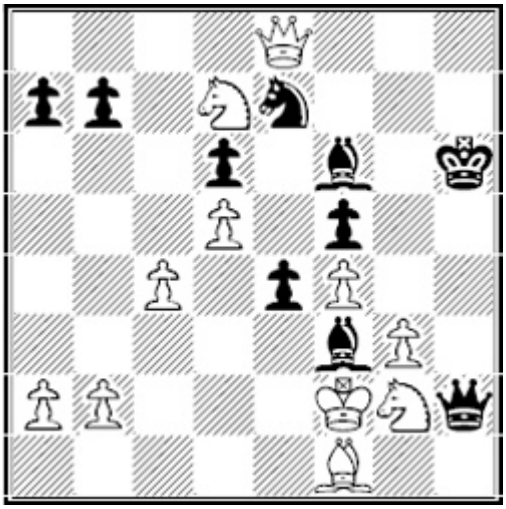
37...Kh7



38.Nf8+?

After conducting the attack elegantly, White unexpectedly slips. After the fact it is easy to see 38.Qf7+, which forces mate. White also overlooks that his e6-knight covers d4, and therefore performs an essential defensive function. It is a common mistake in bullet to assume that the opponent's counterplay has been permanently stopped.

38...Kh6 39.Nd7?



White completely overlooks his opponent's threat. With eight seconds remaining to Black's two seconds, White would still win easily with 39.Ne6.

39...Bd4+!

Black doesn't hesitate, but he can't afford to!

40.Ke1?

White is so shocked by 39... Bd4+ that he takes three seconds to play 40.Ke1, which is the only legal move. The question mark for this forced move is therefore justified, as White's hesitation gave Black more time to calculate his next moves, making it less likely that Black would run out of time.

40...Q×g3+ 41.Kd2

White, still in a state of shock, takes another three seconds for this "only move." This leaves him with two seconds, while Black has only one second left. The drama concludes: **41...Qf2+ 42.Kc1**

By now White has less than a second. 42.Ke2 would have lengthened the game by a move.

42...Q×f1+?! 0-1

42...Q×b2 was mate, so the less exact 42...Q×f1+ gave White a chance, but White ran out of time anyway, with Black having a fraction of a second left...

The next example is worth giving in its entirety. After all, it took less than two minutes to play!

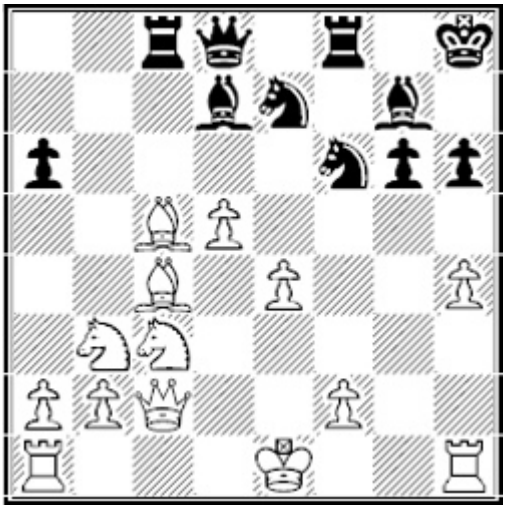
After a fairly successful opening, Black loses the thread of the game and finds himself in a dismal position. This serves to set the stage for a remarkable comeback.

White (1858) – Black (1946) [A40]

1.d4 g6 2.c4 Bg7 3.Nc3 d6 4.e4 Nc6 5.Nge2 e5 6.d5 Nce7 7.Ng3 f5 8.Be2 Nf6 9.h4 f4 10.Nf1 0-0 11.Nd2 h6 12.Nb3 Bd7 13.Bd2 a6 14.Qc2 c5 15.g3

After what might be considered a relatively normal opening, Black has every reason to be satisfied with his position. But in his haste, he overlooks a pawn and things go downhill quickly.

15...Rb8? 16.g×f4 e×f4 17.B×f4 b5 18.B×d6 Rc8 19.B×c5 b×c4 20.B×c4 Kh8



Here we are, at the bottom of the hill, with both players having about 38 seconds remaining. Black's position is abysmal, and he hardly has a glimmer of counterplay.

But almost any problem in bullet chess can be solved if both players work hard enough at finding the solution. Here Black gets some help from his opponent.

21.B×e7?!

There is no reason for White to exchange his strongly-posted c5-bishop for Black's miserable e7-knight.

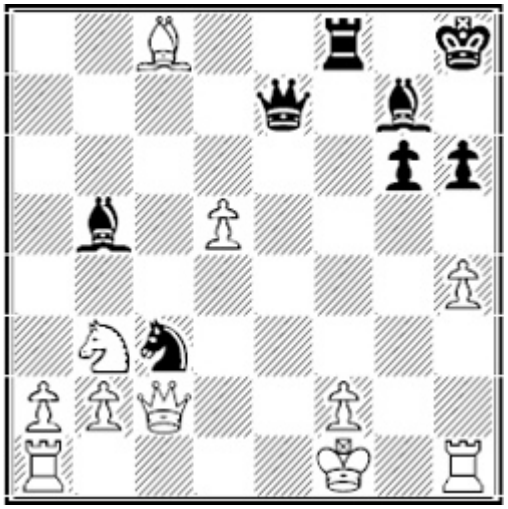
21...Q×e7 22.B×a6 N×e4!

Now it's a game again, with White having an objectively better position, but with Black having the initiative. Which side would you rather play?

23.B×c8

Curiously, Black never bothers to recapture this bishop!

23...N×c3+ 24.Kf1 Bb5+

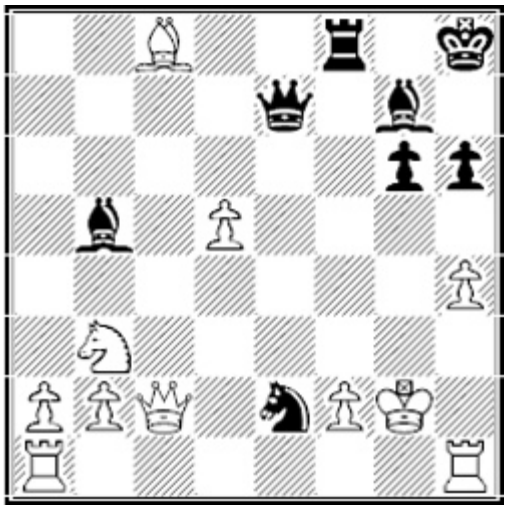


24...N×d5!, threatening 25...Ne3+, was stronger.

25.Kg1?

25.Kg2! was much better.

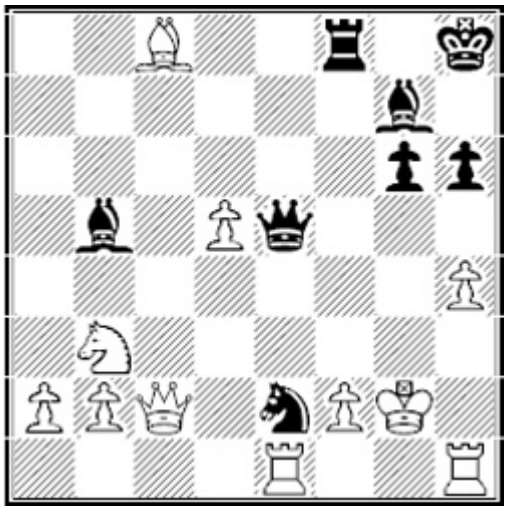
25...Ne2+ 26.Kg2



26...Nf4+?

Black, who took a whopping five seconds for this move, misses the tricky 26...Bd3!, cutting White's queen off from e4. A fatal check on that square would soon follow. Instead, White is able to find ways to resist.

27.Kg3 Qe5 28.Rae1 Ne2+ 29.Kg2

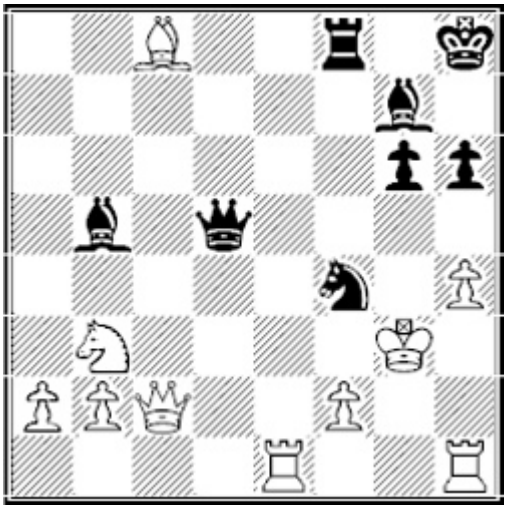


29...Nf4+?

29...R×f2+! mates.

30.Kg3 Q×d5 ***(D)***

Despite his missed opportunities, White's exposed king and Black's resulting initiative give him good chances. After 31.Rhg1, Black would have had to find a way to mate with only nine seconds left, which would have been far from easy.



Instead, White makes the fatal mistake of sinking into a deep think for no less than eight seconds, and completely overlooks Black's threat.

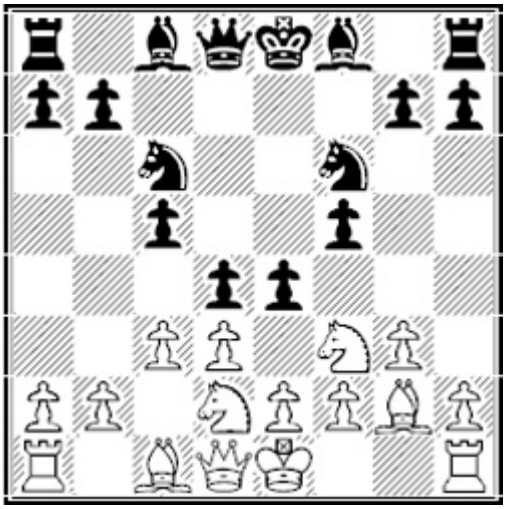
31.Bg4? Qg2 mate 0-1

In the previous game, Black had to endure ten moves of nerve wracking play before White made (or, more accurately, Black took full advantage of) a fatal mistake. But sometimes things are bad almost from the start, and deliverance comes unexpectedly.

White (1919) – Black (1681) [A00]

1.g3 d5 2.Bg2 c5 3.d3 Nc6 4.Nc3 d4 5.Ne4 f5 6.Nd2 e5 7.c3 Nf6 8.Ngf3? e4! ***(D)***

White's last move was bad and Black quite rightly advances in the center. White is a few seconds ahead at this point, but this hardly makes up for his dismal position.



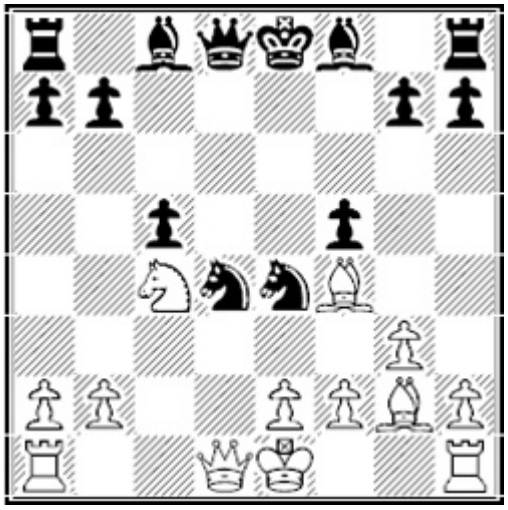
9.d×e4

White now compounds his problems by making an ill-advised pre-move. We shall return to this topic in a later chapter, but for now it's enough to note that White's position is sinking fast.

9...N×e4!? 10.Ng5? N×g5

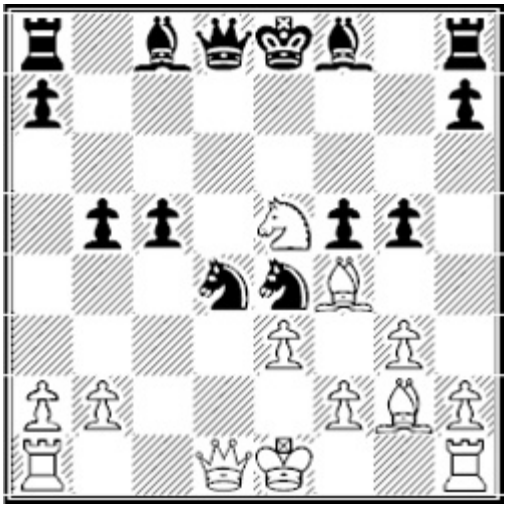
9...f×e4 was so obvious that it never crossed White's mind that Black might capture on e4 with his knight – hence the pre-move which cost a piece. At this point, having foolishly ruined his position, White could be forgiven for giving up, but instead he plays on, mindful that in bullet you never have to resign.

11.Nc4 Ne4 12.c×d4 N×d4 13.Bf4



White has developed some pieces and has 48 seconds remaining to his opponent's 39 seconds, but he still has no reason to be happy. Now, however, Black goes mad, with drastic results.

13...b5?! 14.Ne5 g5?! 15.e3!



Objectively Black is still winning, as he could demonstrate with the mind-boggling 15...Nf3+! (16.Q×f3 Qa5+). But nothing this difficult should have ever come up, and it's not surprising that Black finds the narrow path off the cliff.

15...g×f4? 16.Qh5+ Ke7 17.e×d4 Q×d4?

Even now 17...Qe8 and 17...Qd5 are both better for Black.

18.Nc6+ 1-0 Black loses his queen.

While White was in trouble for much of the previous game, the next game is a horror show from start to finish. White is "lost," objectively speaking, for almost the entire game. Awful as it is, the game must be given in its entirety in order to be fully appreciated.

White (1890) – Black (1636) [A00]

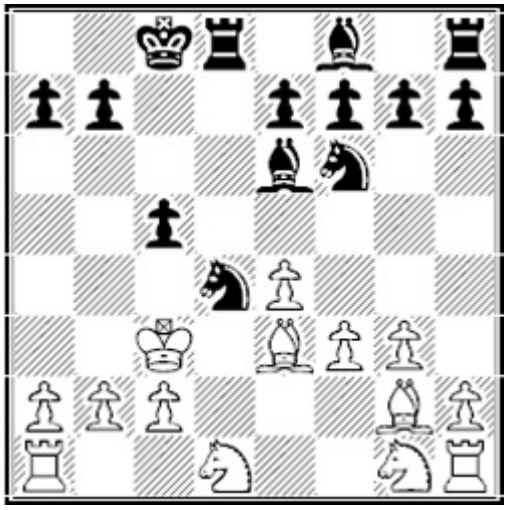
1.g3 c5 2.Bg2 d5 3.d3 Nc6 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.e4? d×e4 6.d×e4 Q×d1+ 7.N×d1 Nd4 8.Kd2 Bg4! 9.f3 0-0-0

By simple play Black has exploited White's opening inaccuracies and saddled White with one of the most difficult problems to solve in bullet – a a vulnerable king.

10.Kc3 Be6?!

Missing the crushing 10...Nb5+ 11.Kb3 (11.Kc4 Rd4+) 11...Be6+. But Black will have many more chances before the game is done.

11.Be3



11...g6?

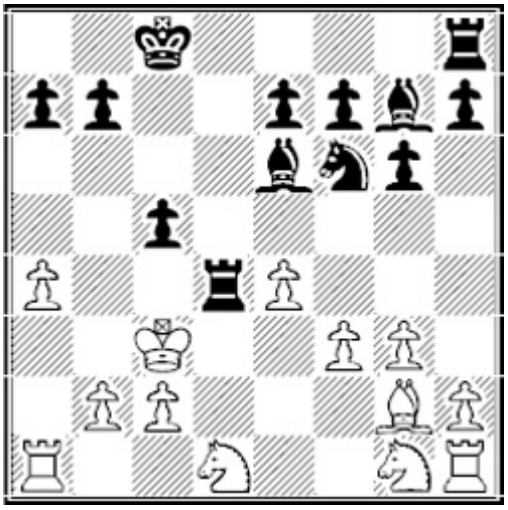
With 39 seconds remaining, three more than his opponent, Black misses 11...Nb5 mate.

12.a4 Bg7 13.B×d4 R×d4*(D)*

14.e5

White hangs on grimly, trying to lock Black’s g7-bishop out of play.

14...Nd7?



14...Nd5+! destroys what's left of White's position.

15.f4 f6 16.Nf3 Rb4 17.Re1 Bg4 18.Kd2 Rd8 19.Kc1 f×e5

Freed from the threats of immediate loss, White now has managed to catch up on time. Both players have 13 seconds left. Of course White's position on the board is still bad, but it's better than it has been for quite a few moves.

20.c3! Rb6 21.f×e5 Bh6+ 22.Kb1

With White down to six seconds, Black suddenly seizes up and drops to only three seconds.

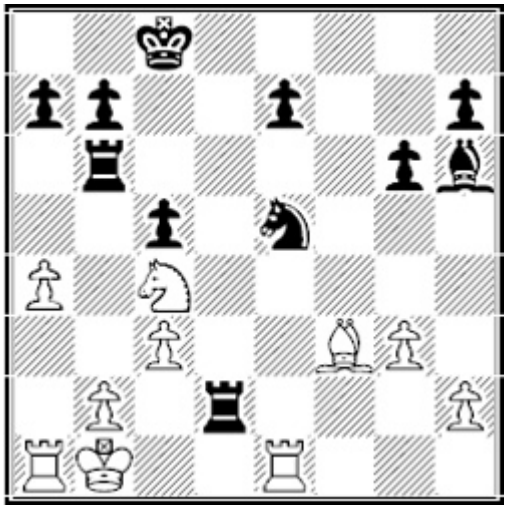
22...B×f3 23.B×f3 N×e5 24.Ne3?

Missing 24.R×e5, but this no longer matters because Black is running out of time.

24...Rd2

Black doesn't have enough time for 24...N×f3.

25.Nc4! 1-0



An optically strong move which defends White's b2-pawn and forks Black's rooks. Of course, White's c4-knight is hanging, but Black lost on time.

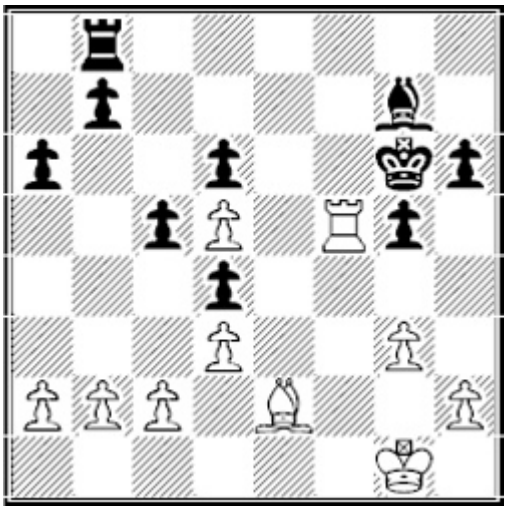
Ridiculously funny games

While there is no shortage of entertaining games in this book, it is worth stressing that bullet chess is fun in part because strange things happen almost as a matter of routine. Whether these games are amusing may depend on your perspective (the loser usually wouldn't think so) and on your sense of humor, but the mistakes that are made and the opportunities that are missed in bullet range from the sublime to the ridiculous, and we all know only one step separates the two.

So let's have a look at a sample of the funny things that can happen in bullet. White's position is almost resignable, as he is facing a ten-second deficit (27 seconds left to Black's 37 seconds) in a colorless position. However, the fun is only just beginning.

Black has just played 24...Kg6, attacking White's f5-rook.

White (1979) – Black (1699) [A00]



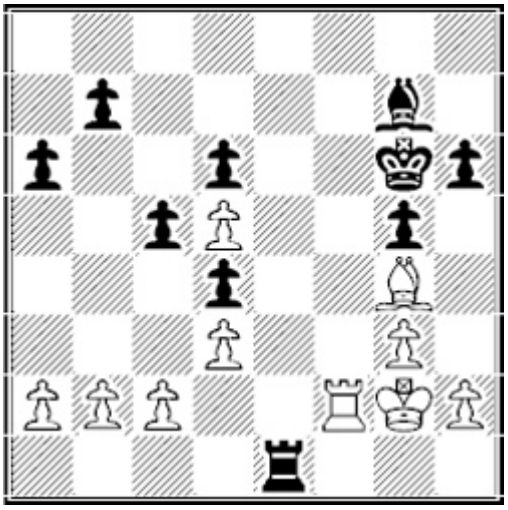
25.Bg4?!

Objectively White has no prospects, so it's unfair to condemn this move too harshly. After 25.g4 Rf8!, White's chances of holding the opposite-colored bishop ending are remote, as Black's ten-second advantage should be decisive. White's only hope is to get help from his opponent.

25...Re8?

25...h5 would have saved Black a lot of grief.

26.Rf2 Re1+ 27.Kg2



27...Rb1? 28.Bf5+

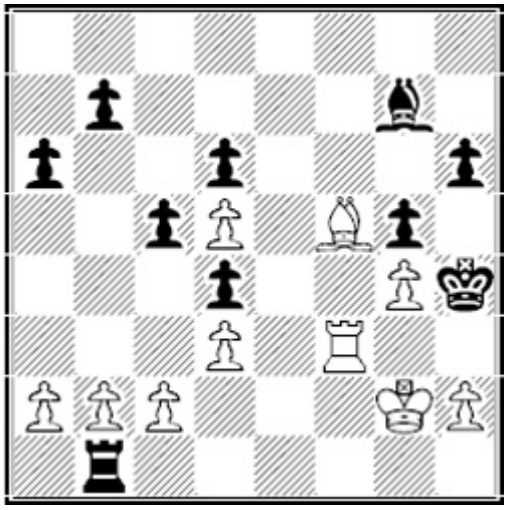
Black has increased his lead in time to 12 seconds, but in return he has allowed White counterplay.

One might say that Black fails to accurately assess the nature of his advantage (his lead in time), or that Black misunderstands how to exploit his advantage (avoid mate and win on time). We shall return to these themes later on.

One might also say that Black is doing his best to play good moves, but ends up playing bad ones. This is common in many forms of chess.

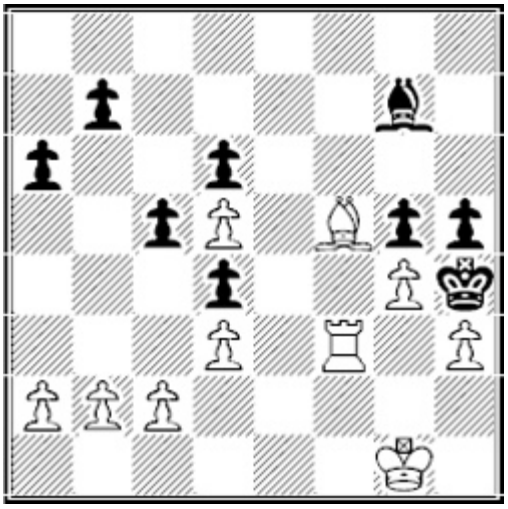
In the meantime, Black has to move his king out of check, and instinctively avoids allowing White a discovered check.

28...Kh5? 29.g4+! Kh4 30.Rf3!



Black unexpectedly finds himself in a mating net! Black now spends nine (!) seconds trying to find a way out (time which would have been better spent a little earlier), but can only come up with..

30...Rg1+ 31.K×g1 h5 32.h3

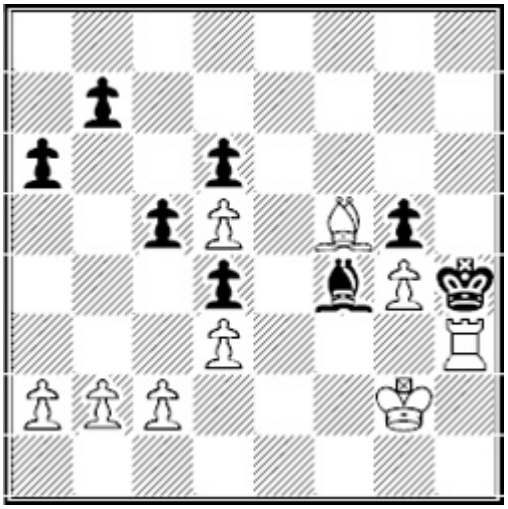


Black's king is safe for the moment, but he is a rook down, and with 13 seconds left, White has time to win either by promoting a pawn or playing for mate by bringing his rook to h7. It doesn't come to this, however, as

Black gives a final, courteous assist to his opponent, recreating the mating net by opening h3 for White's rook.

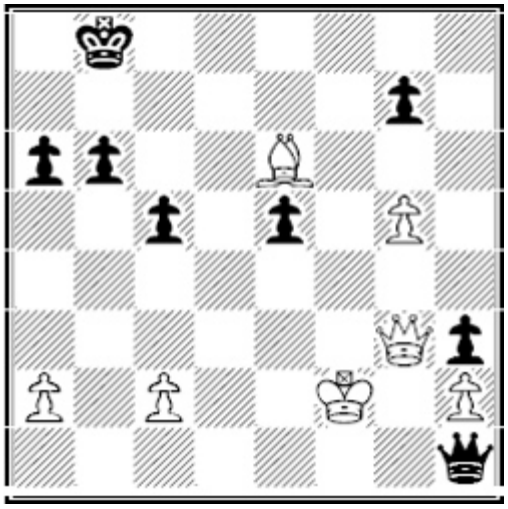
32...h×g4? 33.h×g4 Be5 34.Kg2 Bf4 35.Rh3 mate 1-0

In case you have trouble visualizing the mating pattern, here it is:



In the next game, no one seems to want to win – a phenomenon which occurs more often than you might think in bullet.

White (2113) – Black (1961) [A00]



With only five seconds left, White is in bad shape, despite his extra piece. It will take a miracle for him to convert his material advantage before he runs out of time. Black has 20 seconds remaining.

36...Qd1?

36...Qe4! was the right move, after which it would have been impossible for White to effectively attack Black's king or even avoid time-consuming checks from Black's queen.

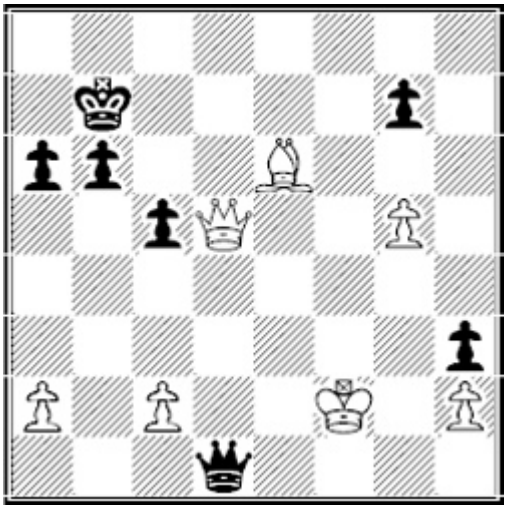
36...Qg2+!? was a riskier alternative, exchanging queens, as after 37.Q×g2 h×g2 38.h4, White gets another queen and might be able to force mate in time. The ultimate assessment of the strength of 36...Qg2+!? would depend on how long White took to answer it.

37.Q×e5+

White now has four seconds left.

37...Kb7 38.Qd5+?! ***(D)***

In one sense a mistake, as after 38...Q×d5 39.B×d5+, it's difficult to see how White could force mate in four seconds, since he would have to bring his king into the game, create a passed pawn, get a new queen...



But could White really have mated in the time he had left as long as Black's queen was on the board? From that perspective, keep in mind that 38.Qd5+?! has another point.

38...Kc7?

Black is so intent on running White out of time that he completely overlooks that the opposing queens are attacking one another.

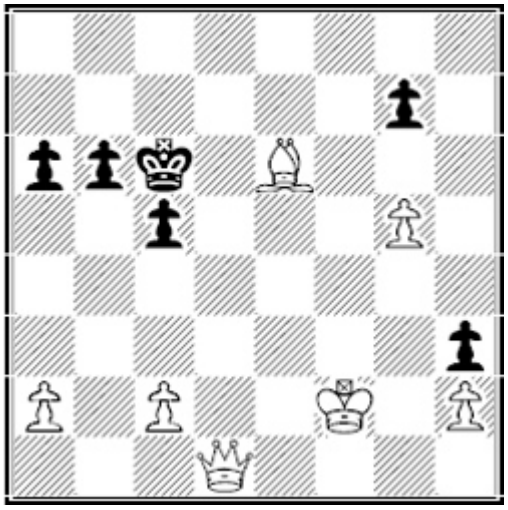
39.Q×d1?

This move deserves a question mark because White took four seconds (!) to see that Black's queen was hanging! Now that White has less than a second left, all Black has to do to win is to avoid mate.

39...Kc6? ***(D)***

This isn't the surest path to victory. Black walks into mate in one!

40.Qg4?



White misses the mate and makes a meaningless move. 40.Qd7 was mate.

40...Kb5?! 41.Qf5?!

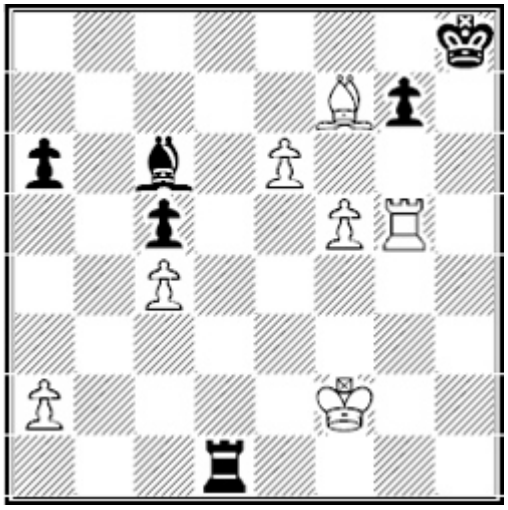
We could give both this move and Black's previous move question marks, because White could now mate in two with 41.Qd7+, but this turns out to be academic.

41...a5 0-1

White lost on time.

Such helpfulness from an opponent is not at all uncommon in bullet, which clearly attracts a higher class of player.

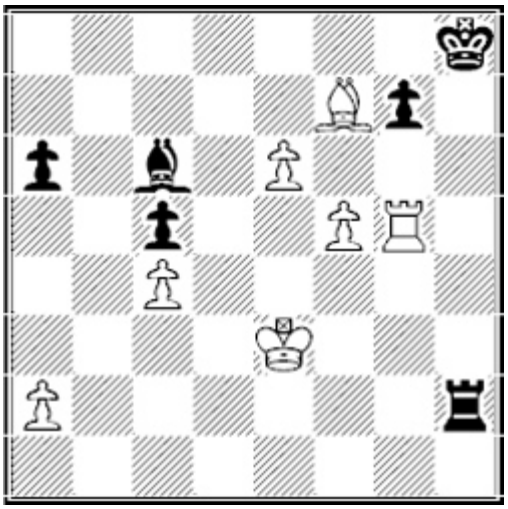
White (2130) – Black (2006) [A00]



After an uneven game, which you are better off not seeing, White has emerged with a winning position. His last move, 25.R×g5, capturing Black's dark-squared bishop, threatens a deadly check on h5, which forces Black's rook to the h-file.

Time was not yet a significant consideration, as White has 20 seconds remaining, while Black has 22 seconds. In bullet endings, though, where a quick mate is unlikely, time often turns out to be the deciding factor.

35...Rd2+ 36.Ke3 Rh2



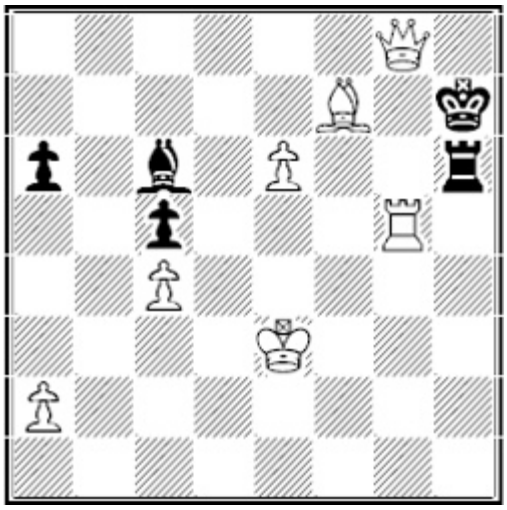
37.f6?!

White took several seconds for this move, but it was better to invade Black's position with his king. After 37.Kf4, followed by K-e5-d6, there isn't much Black can do.

37...Rh6?

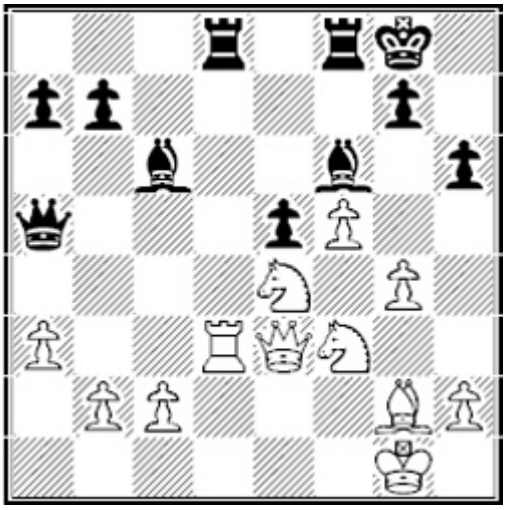
Black's position was still difficult after 37.f6?!, as 37...g×f6 38.R×c5 wins for White, although at least Black's king has some breathing room. 37...Rh6? not only overlooks White's threat of 38.f×g7+, but even helps White a little by preventing Black's king from escaping to h6, shortening the game by a move.

38.f×g7+ Kh7 39.g8Q mate 1-0



In the next example, Black first allows his opponent to attack, then actively helps him.

White (1913) – Black (1875) [A00]



We have spared the reader from seeing the first part of this game, but you can take our word for it that White was fortunate to get to the diagrammed position.

With 29 seconds left, against Black's 26 seconds, White expresses his exuberance by beginning a dubious, but dangerous, pawn storm which more or less wrecks his own position.

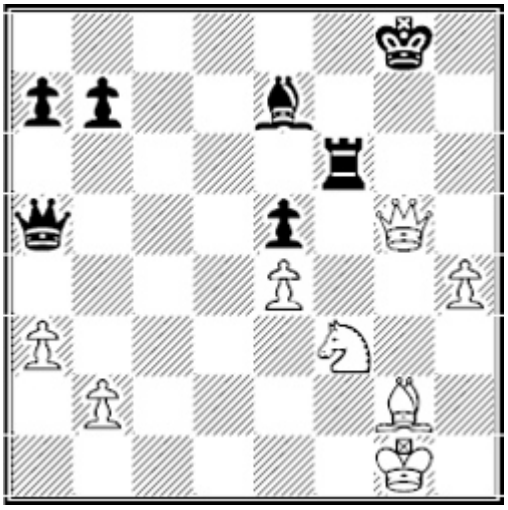
25.h4!? Be7 26.g5 R×d3 27.c×d3 R×f5

One of many ways to refute White's attack.

28.g×h6 g×h6?

28...Rf4! was much safer, but Black may have missed this defensive resource because by now he had only 12 seconds remaining. If so, then White deserves credit for having muddied the waters.

29.Q×h6 B×e4 30.d×e4 Rf6 31.Qg5+



Black has allowed his opponent much more play than he needed to, but after almost any reasonable black reply, the game is equal (at least on the board; White still has a significant time advantage). But before time became a decisive factor, Black found one of the few ways to lose by force.

31...Kf7? 32.N×e5+ Ke6 33. Bh3+! Kd6 34.Nc4+ Kc6 35.N×a5+ Kb6

The attack has unfolded like a study. Black loses his queen.

36.b4 Kc7 37.Qe5+ 1-0

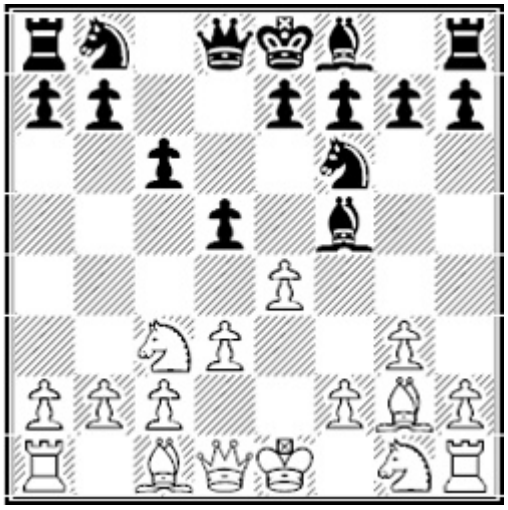
Black lost on time.

The next game we give in its entirety, because of the instructive pre-move mistake in the opening.

But there's more to the game than that. Many other mistakes ensue, and a good time is had by all.

White (2118) – Black (2042) [A00]

1.d3 c6 2.g3 d5 3. Bg2 Nf6 4.Nc3 Bf5 5.e4!?



5...e6?

Black, intent on gaining a time advantage, played this move instantly, losing a piece. It is hard to guess what move he was expecting. But this is nothing compared to what happens later.

6.e×f5 e×f5

Both players continue as if nothing has happened.

7.Nf3 Be7 8.0-0 0-0

Black hasn’t missed a beat, and now has 58 seconds remaining, to White’s 53 seconds.

9.Re1 Nbd7 10.Nh4?! g6 11. Bg5 Re8

Now Black starts thinking, and the time evens out.

12.Qd2 Nf8 13. Bh6 Ne6?!

Each player has 50 seconds remaining.

14.Re2

Missing 14.N×f5! (14...g×f5? 15.R×e6!).

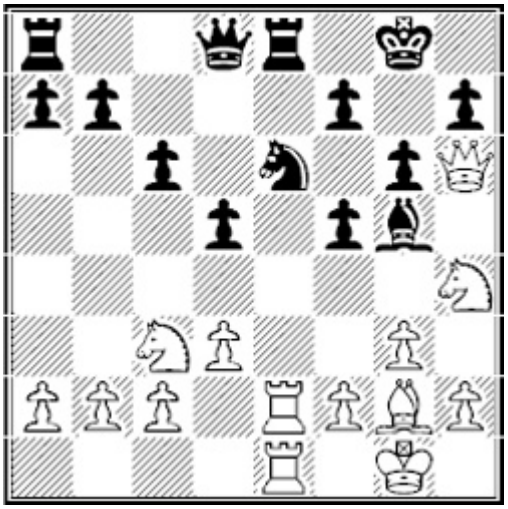
14...Ng4

After 14...Nd4!, White's advantage would be reduced.

15.Rae1?

White overlooks Black's threat.

15...N×h6 16.Q×h6? Bg5



White's queen is trapped. Game over, one would think, but this is bullet.

This game could have easily been put in the previous part of this chapter, but the vindication of White's determination to see the game through to the end turns out to be pretty funny.

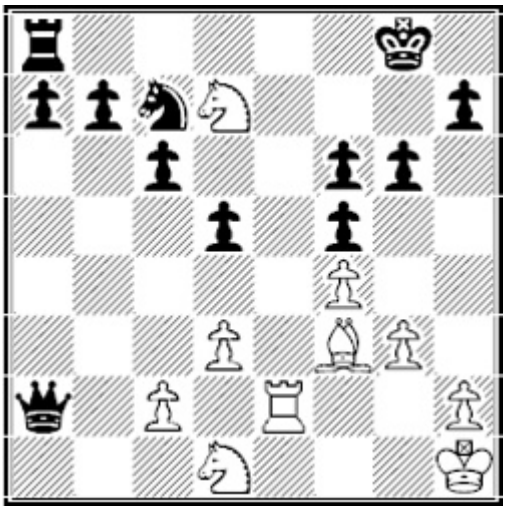
17.Q×g5 Q×g5 18.f4 Qd8 19.Nf3?! Qb6+ 20.Kh1 Nc7

Black could also just take White's b2-pawn, but trading rooks makes sense too. By now Black also has a three-second lead in time, so things look dark for White.

21.Ne5!?

Another bad move, although since good moves wouldn't help, we won't be too critical.

21...f6! 22.Nd7 R×e2 23.R×e2 Q×b2 24.Nd1 Q×a2 25. Bf3

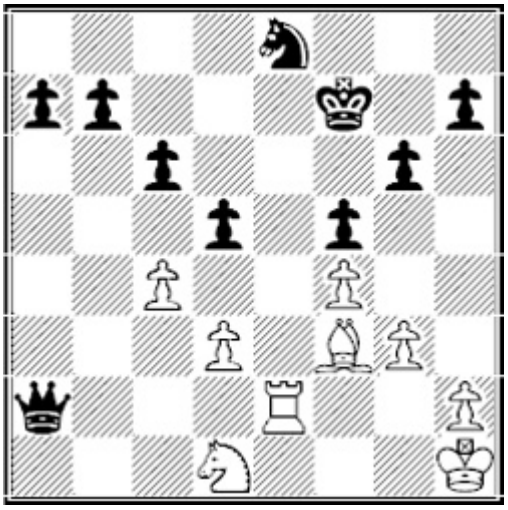


With two bad pieces for a queen and three pawns, and both sides having more than 30 seconds left, White needs a miracle.

25...Re8?

And here's the start of one.

26.N×f6+ Kf7 27.N×e8 N×e8 28.c4!



White strikes while the iron is hot, creating an imaginary threat against Black's d5-pawn.

28...Nf6?

Black "defends" his d5-pawn, not realizing that it was already defended by his a2-queen. Backwards diagonal moves are often hard to see, as we will discuss later in more detail. But so are sideways moves and discovered attacks, and Black overlooks that his queen is now attacked by White's e2-rook. This unusual (and for Black, unfortunate) confluence of two of the most common types of mistakes proves fatal.

Since time wasn't really an issue (Black had 31 seconds left), we can also speculate that he may have been thrown off by his earlier mistake (25...Re8?), or he might have simply forgotten that his queen was on a2, because it was so far from the rest of his pieces. But Black's oversight fits into a surprisingly common pattern that we explore in more detail in Chapter 14, where we catalogue some of the more frequent mistakes in bullet.

In any event, as is so often the case, the loser is the player who makes the last mistake of the game, and here it unquestionably is Black.

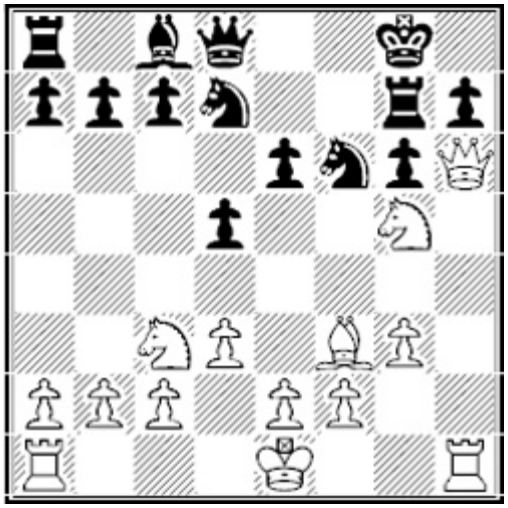
29.R×a2 ... 1-0

White won uneventfully after Black hung his remaining piece 15 moves later.

The next examples are included purely for the mayhem caused by White's knights. It is always entertaining, at least for the spectators, when one or two pieces demolish the opposing position all on their own. For some reason, when knights manage to create havoc, the games are even more memorable, although perhaps not for the losing player.

It's difficult to know what lies behind these disasters, other than fate, or perhaps just bad luck, pure and simple.

White (1880) – Black (1721) [A00]

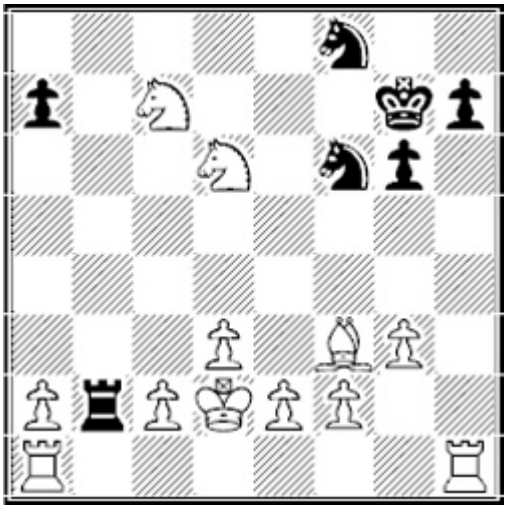


Black's last move, with 39 seconds left, was 15...Nbd7?, which allows a cute tactic.

16.Q×g7+! K×g7 17.N×e6+ Kg8 18.N×d8

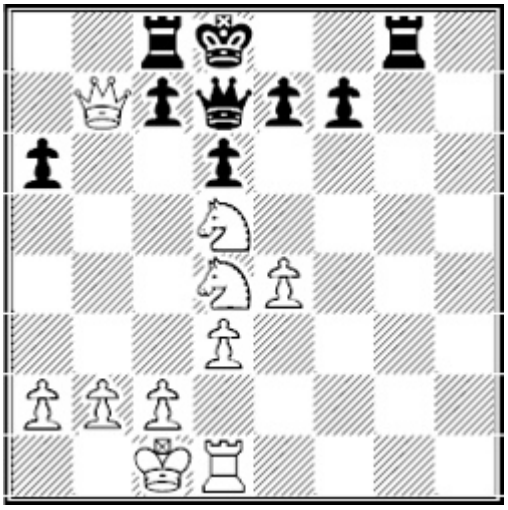
White's opportunistic three-move combination has won him a rook, but the subsequent cavalry raid by White's knights is what gives this game its true amusement value.

18...Nf8 19.N×d5 Kg7 20.N×c7 Rb8 21.Kd2 Bd7 22.N×b7 Bc8 23.Nd6 Rb6?! 24.N×c8 R×b2 25.Nd6 1-0



Facing a massive material and time deficit, Black resigned.

White (2025) – Black (1853) [A00]

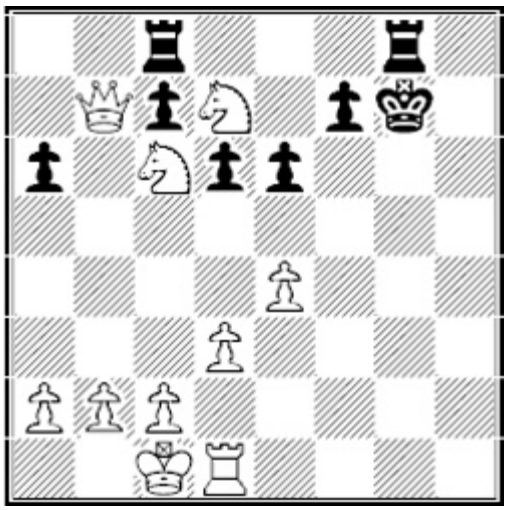


Each player has 23 seconds left, but on the board Black is losing. White's knights are worth more than a rook, but who could have foreseen their impending rampage?

27...e6? 28.Nc6+ Ke8

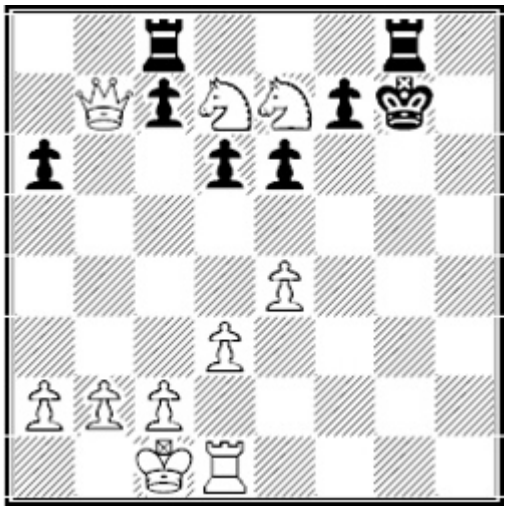
The first of many forks.

29.Nf6+ Kf8 30.N×d7+ Kg7



White has picked up a queen for free, but, adding insult to injury, his knights continue to run roughshod over Black's position. For his part, Black plays on, hoping that eventually the knights will go away.

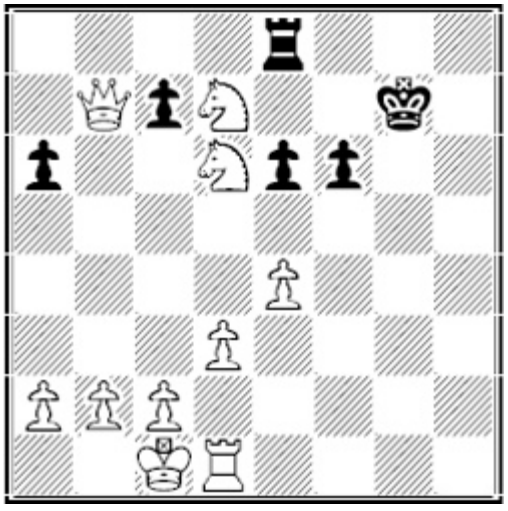
31.Ne7



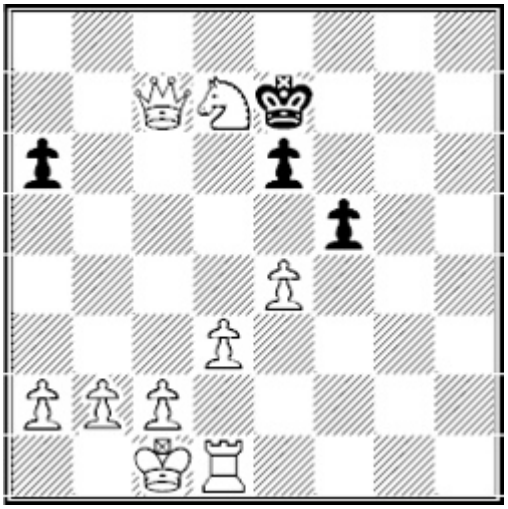
It's not easy to figure out just how White's knights got to d7 and e7.

31...Rge8 32.N×c8 f6 33.N×d6

There's not much to say...



33...Re7 34.Q×c7 f5 35.Nc8 Kf7 36.N×e7 K×e7



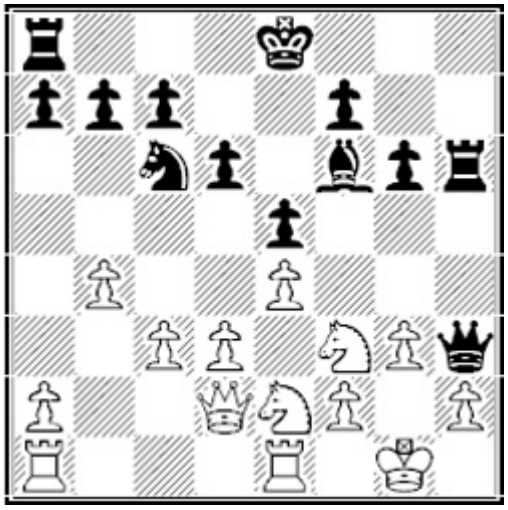
37.e×f5 e5 38.Re1 Kf7 39.R×e5 a5 40.Q×a5 Kg7 41.Qc7 1-0

Black ran out of time, with White having six seconds left.

White (1984) – Black (2090) [B06] ***(D)***

Even apparently simple positions can lead to mutual chess blindness if the players are in the right frame of mind.

Black has sacrificed his h-pawn for pressure against White's king, and while there is no immediate win the pressure is real, especially because White's e2-knight is awkwardly placed.



Black presses on with his attack, although improving the placement of his king wouldn’t be a bad idea either. White has 41 seconds left, while Black has 47 seconds, so time is not yet a major factor.

17...g5!? 18.b5 g4?

In a misguided attempt to fight for the initiative, Black overplays his hand. 18...Ne7, followed by the judicious advance of Black’s g5-pawn, would leave White with a difficult defensive task. Now the fun begins.

19.Nh4! B×h4? 20.g×h4?

Caught up in the illusion, White overlooks that Black’s h3-queen no longer defends the h6-rook, because the h4-bishop is in the way. 20.Q×h6! decides the game on the spot.

20...Q×h4

Now Black reaps the rewards of his conjuring trick, as his attack gains steam.

21.Ng3 Q×h2+ 22.Kf1 Ne7

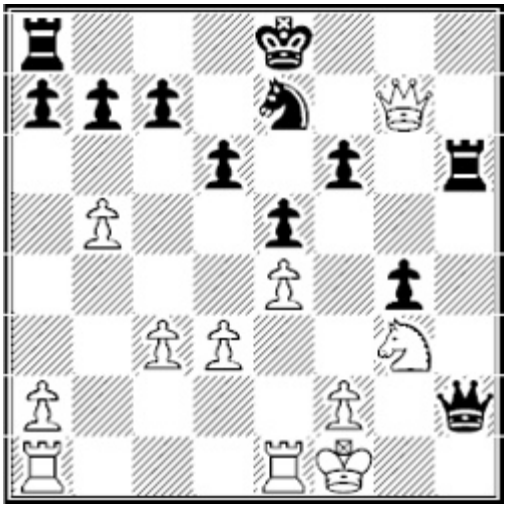
With an attack, an extra pawn and a time advantage (37 seconds remaining vs. White's 31 seconds), Black should win.

23.Qg5!? f6?

The question mark is well-deserved. Not only are 23... Rg6 and 23...Qh4 better, but Black also took 11 seconds for 23...f6?, giving away his time advantage.

Black was still thinking in terms of mate, but in reality he simply had a better position and a large time edge, and should have been content.

24.Qg7?

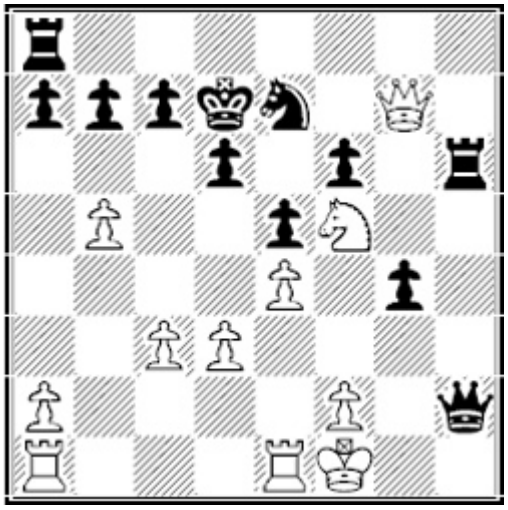


For his part, White fails to appreciate that his position is quite playable after 24.Q×g4, and there is no need for extreme measures.

24...Kd7?

Missing 24...Rg6!, trapping White's queen. As mentioned, Black was set on mate, and was unable to switch gears and go after White's queen. To put it another way, if White's king were completely safe, Black would likely have seen 24...Rg6!

25.Nf5?



After 25.Q×g4+, the position would be equal, but the threat to Black's e7-knight looks strong.

25...Qh1+?

After this check, Black is lost. The tragedy is that 25...Qh3+ 26.Ke2 Rh7! 27.Q×f6 Rf8!! (and this move really does deserve two exclamation marks) wins for Black, as 28.Q×f8 Ng6!, followed by 29... Nf4+, forces mate.

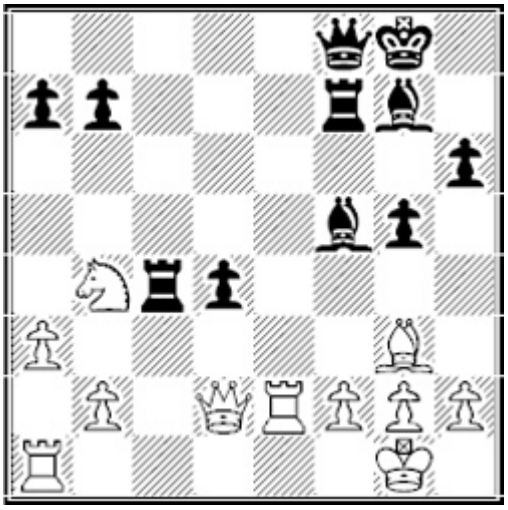
Of course, it would be quite an accomplishment to see this variation in a tournament game, much less in a bullet game with a little over 20 seconds remaining.

26.Ke2 Qf3+ 27.Kd2 Qf4+ 28.Kc2 Re8 29.Q×h6 ... 1-0

Black's heroic effort to defend his h6-rook are for naught, because it was attacked twice. With 20 seconds left, White had little trouble bringing home the point.

The give-and-take in bullet can reach extreme levels, with the players alternating between excellent moves and blunders. This forces the players to wrestle with positions that really ought not to have ever arisen, and the result can be chaotic.

White (2281) – Black (2367) [A40]



This position is quite balanced and, with 28 seconds remaining to White's 15 seconds, Black should win fairly easily. For example, after 23...Re7!, exchanging a pair of rooks, Black is in little danger and the win should just be a matter of time (literally). Instead quite impossible things start to happen.

23...d3?!

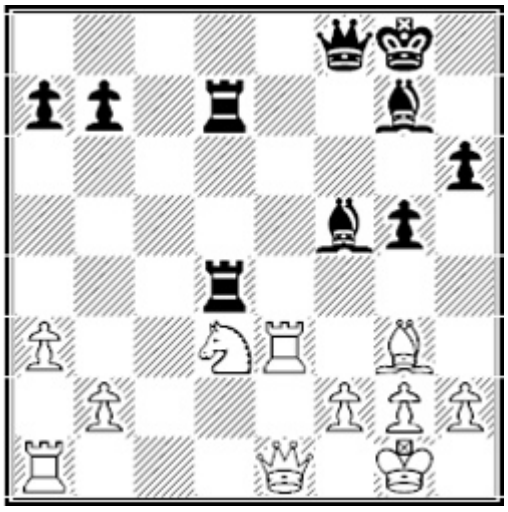
Black tries to take the initiative, on the theory that White will fail to meet the challenge because of his time deficit. But objectively 23...d3?! is risky.

24.N×d3 Rd7 25.Re3

The immediate 25.Qe1! was even stronger.

25...Rcd4 26.Qe1! ***(D)***

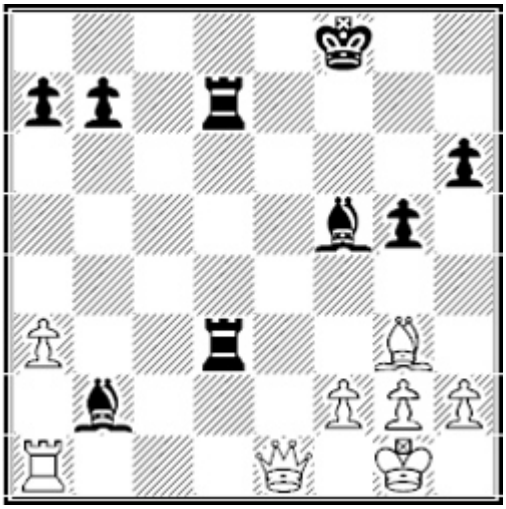
After a few seconds thought, White finds the strongest continuation. Black has also been thinking, and now has 18 seconds remaining, while White has 12 seconds. At about this point Black probably started having doubts about the wisdom of his having stirred the pot with 23...d3?!



26...R×d3!?

Black gives up his queen for a rook and a bishop.

27.Re8 B×b2!? 28.R×f8+ K×f8



29.Rb1?

This is a mistake. White likely saw that 29.Qb4+ Kg8 30.Q×b2? Rd1+ mates for Black, so he dismissed 20.Qb4+ altogether. In fact, after 29.Qb4+ Kg8 30.Rf1!, White retains a slight edge.

29...Bd4?

Black fails to take advantage of his opportunity by playing 29...Rd2!, which cuts off White's queen check and wins an additional exchange. What's worse is that Black's lead in time is starting to disappear.

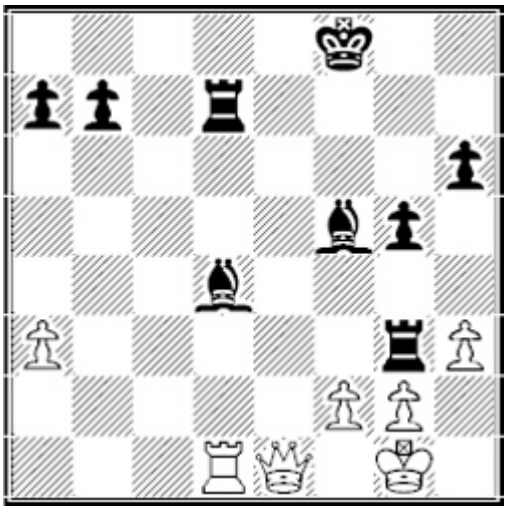
30.h3?

Played instantly, to give White's king an escape square against a possible back rank check. Black's last move blocked the d-file, however, so ...Rd1+ is not possible at the moment.

30...R×g3!

Noticing that White's f2-pawn is pinned along the g1-a7 diagonal, Black scoops up a piece. With 12 seconds left to White's six seconds, Black has only to consolidate...

31.Rd1



31...B×h3?

As is so often the case in bullet, trying to think leads to a mistake. Black spent three seconds on this move, which is a serious overplay. Both the simple 31...Rb3 and the more complicated 31...Bc3 leave Black securely on top.

32.Qb4+! Kg7?

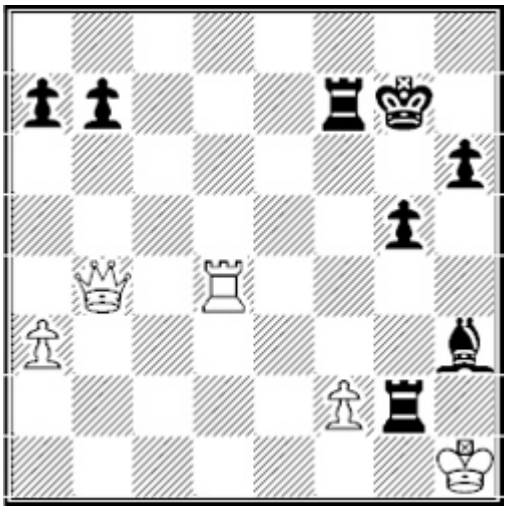
Black spent another few seconds on this move, which puts his king on the wrong square. After 32...Kg8! 33.R×d4 R×g2+ 34.Kh1 R×f2, Black's d7-rook is defended by his h3-bishop (a backwards diagonal move!) and White has no tricks with his queen.

This was very hard to see in a bullet game, but Black has only himself to blame. He unnecessarily provoked complications at several key moments, then used up his time advantage trying to figure them out.

33.R×d4 R×g2+

Black was now a second behind in time (five seconds to White's six seconds).

34.Kh1 Rf7



35.Qc3!

Now White is finding moves!

35...Rf×f2 36.Rd2+ Kg6 37.R×f2 R×f2 38.Q×h3 1-0

Black ran out of time. White had four seconds left.

Chapter 3

Time

Chess teachers have often broken down the components of chess positions into categories, such as development (or activity), material (extra pawns or pieces), space (control of the board) and pawn structure. One of the most important features of chess strength is knowing when to give up something in one category (say, material) for an advantage in another category (such as development or space).

What chess pedants often don’t emphasize sufficiently are the psychological and competitive aspects of chess. Great attacking players like Tal often so confused their opponents that they grew short of time and lost their way (and the game). This was risky, of course, because there could be no guarantee that the opponent would get into time trouble, much less make a mistake as a result.

It should be noted that, less commonly, some players induce the same confusion in their opponents by strategic means, although that is even more difficult to accomplish.

When these famous games are analyzed, the psychological tension and effects of time trouble are often downplayed. In fact, a blunder in time trouble is sometimes looked on as a lucky win by the opponent, rather than the logical result of the previous play. But even in normal tournament chess neither player has unlimited time, and in bullet chess time is a key element of almost every position.

In bullet, with only one minute for the game, there is no question as to whether there will be a time scramble – the entire game is a time scramble! Since a player who is behind on time must actually force checkmate on the board in order to win, a time advantage can be decisive, and can be measured in the same terms as a material or other advantage.

In short, bullet players must fundamentally change their thinking about the role of time in chess. They must accept that time (on the clock) is every bit as important (and sometimes more important) than the position on the board. As we shall see, it can be worthwhile to trade even a significant amount of material for an advantage of a few seconds on the clock.

Any win is a good win

Recognizing the critical importance of time in bullet chess has a very important corollary – winning on time is every bit as valid as winning on the board. It is not uncommon for someone to lose a one-minute game on time, then claim that they outplayed their opponent. With all due respect to the inalienable right to make excuses after losing, in bullet if you lose, you deserved to lose. Losing on time because you were trying to be careful is no different than falling into a mate in one because you were moving too fast.

From the other side of the board, this means that winning on time is just as honorable as winning by a brilliant combination – or maybe a swindle. In any case, playing on in a “lost” position in bullet in the hope that your opponent won’t have enough time to mate is perfectly acceptable and is intrinsic to the game. After all, would you be losing if you had taken more time to think?

How fast can you go?

Bullet novices are usually shocked at how quickly the time goes by, and at first they find that after 15 or 20 moves they have only a few seconds left. But it doesn't take long to realize that the first few moves can be played very quickly, and after a few sessions players find their games are reaching 25, 30 and more moves.

North American readers will be familiar with the baseball concept of the "pitch count," which is how many times a pitcher can throw the ball before his arm starts to get tired and he loses his speed, control or both. In bullet, a player's "move count" is the number of moves he or she can make in an average game (here "average" refers to the complexity and difficulty of the game).

This statistic is important because you have to know your limitations and play within them. If you can only expect to play 30 moves, then you'd better play for mate. If you can expect to play 50 or more moves, endings become a feasible alternative.

The average normal chess game lasts around 40-45 moves. Bullet games tend to be about the same number of moves, on average, because two additional factors roughly cancel out: Bullet games can legitimately be played out to mate, which makes the games longer, but there are more mistakes in bullet games, which makes the games shorter.

If you can make 50 moves in a minute, you will finish most of your bullet games without losing on time. Keep in mind that of the remaining games, your opponent might run out of time before you do!

Time management

It follows that time management is a crucial skill in bullet, but there is more to it than just moving quickly (useful as that may be). The best bullet players are not necessarily the fastest, but rather those who know when to use their time.

At the start of a game, each player has a queen, two rooks, two bishops and so on, all of which can be given up in order to achieve the desired goal – a win. Similarly, each player has a minute of time, and that resource should also be used judiciously during the game in order to win. No points are awarded for being ahead in material when mate is delivered, just as there is no prize for being ahead on time when the game ends (especially if you lose).

The key to time management in bullet is therefore using your time in the right way. Sheer speed will win you games, but moving too fast will also cost you points.

In this chapter, we will look at some examples of good and bad time management. It goes without saying that the theme of time will arise repeatedly in this book, and good bullet players are always thinking of the clock as well as the position.

Speed kills

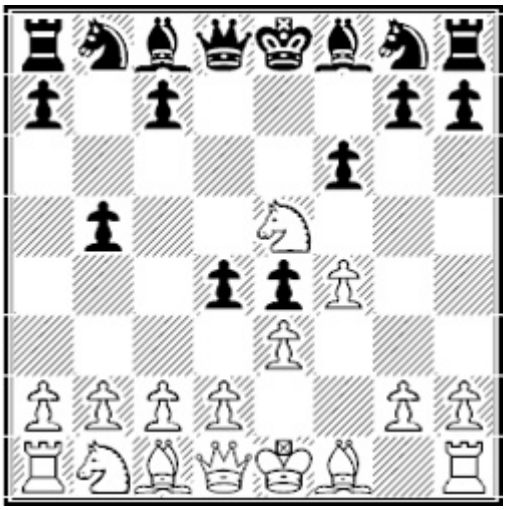
In the first game in this chapter, we see an example of Black trading material for time, or at least time futures. The investment pays off.

White (2196) – Black (2859) [A02]

1.f4 e5 2.Nf3?!

Not considered best, but theory doesn't matter all that much in bullet chess!

2...e4 3.Ne5 d6 4.Nc4 d5 5.Ne3 d4 6.Nc4 b5 7.Ne5 f6 8.e3!



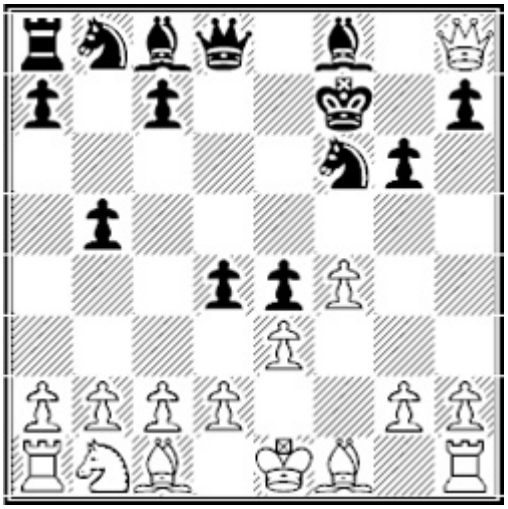
The only move, as otherwise White loses a piece with almost no compensation.

8...f×e5 9.Qh5+ g6!?

Objectively 9...Kd7 was better, but Black intentionally sacrifices his h8-rook in order to create problems for his opponent.

There are, in general, two ways of approaching bullet chess and players must figure out which approach better suits their style. It is possible to play in a defensive style, in which a player accepts material and tries to fend off the ensuing threats (the "Kortschnoi style"). The other style, which tends to be more suitable for tactical players, is to give up material where appropriate to create threats and make the opponent use his or her time to defend against those threats (the "Tal style"). The latter approach is easier for most players, as you don't have to constantly be on the lookout for tactical shots. It's more fun to be the one creating them!

10.Q×e5+ Kf7 11.Q×h8 Nf6



Here White has 47 seconds remaining, and Black has 51 seconds.

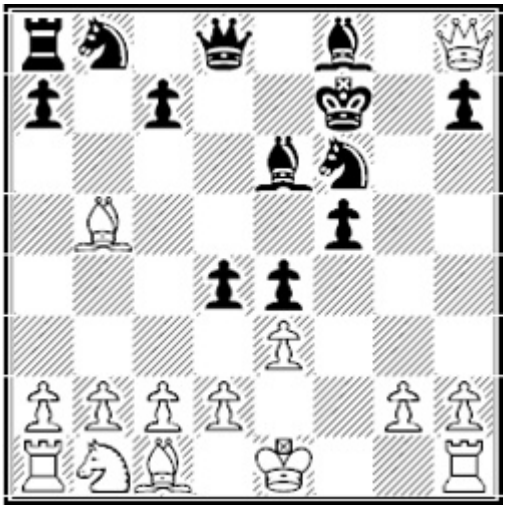
12.B×b5

White used three seconds to play this natural move, because his queen was potentially in danger and he had to make sure it couldn’t be trapped immediately. The “Tal style” is often effective because it causes the opponent to use time on even the most basic moves.

12...Be6 13.f5!?

White used another three seconds for this move, which is not at all bad if followed up correctly.

13...g×f5



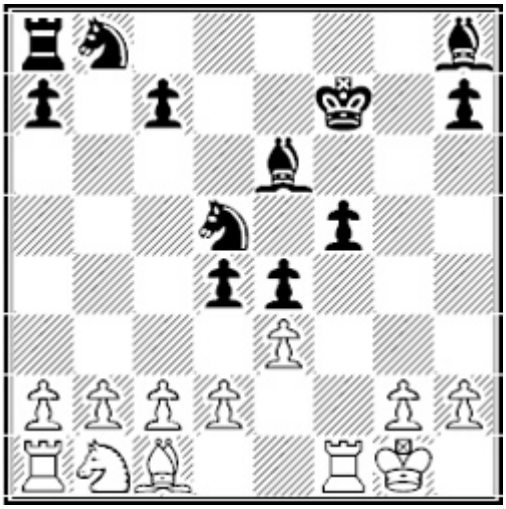
14.0-0?

The cold-blooded 14.g4! is called for by the silicon beasts, but it is not so easy for a human to find such a move in a bullet game.

14...Qd5 15.Ba4?!

15.Be8+!? was White's last chance to avoid a clear disadvantage, although the resulting position would be fun to play for Black.

15...Bg7 16.Bb3?! B×h8 17.B×d5 N×d5

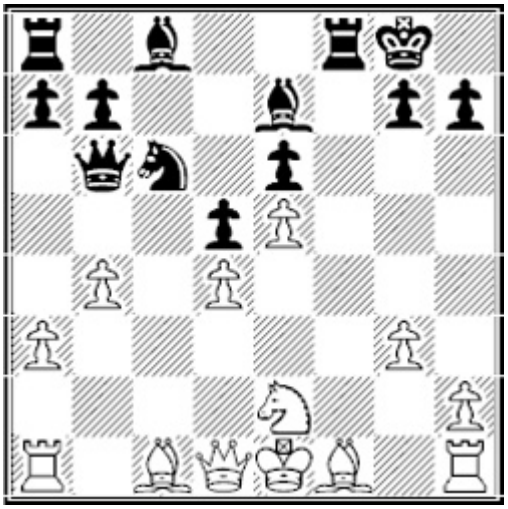


White now has 30 seconds left, while Black has 38 seconds. White, having missed his chance for a knockout blow, stands worse and has less time as well. The rest of the game is a bit gory.

18.e×d4 B×d4+ 19.Kh1 Nc6 20.Nc3 Ndb4 21.a3 N×c2 22.Rb1 Bf6 23.b4 Rd8 24.Bb2 R×d2 25.Nb5 Ne5 26.N×c7 Bc4 27.Rfc1 Nd3 28.B×f6 N×c1 29.Bg5 Rd1 mate 0-1

In the next game, Black again sacrifices material in order to throw White off his game and create time trouble for him. Despite missing some opportunities, Black's overall strategy works, demonstrating that in bullet, tactical precision isn't always the key to victory.

White (2396) – Black (2930) [C11]

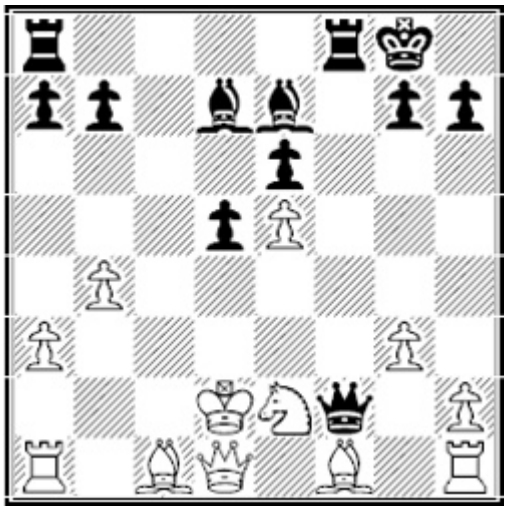


This position arose out of a French Defense and Black has a good position. He could continue positionally with 14...a5! or just develop with 14...Bd7, but in bullet more radical measures can work as well.

14...N×e5!?

14...N×e5!? is a thematic, although not obviously winning, sacrifice. But in bullet, it creates all sorts of problems for White, and problems usually take time to solve...

15.d×e5 Qf2+ 16.Kd2 Bd7



17.Kc3?!

White takes radical measures to try to solve the problem of having his king floating in the center of the board.

17...Rac8+?

A natural response, played quickly, but 17...Qf3+! and 18...Q×h1 won a rook.

18.Kb2 Bb5

White's bold kingwalk has succeeded up to a point, although it is not easy for White to fully consolidate. Another cloud has appeared on the horizon,

however, as Black has a substantial time advantage, with 46 seconds remaining, against White's 36 seconds.

19.Qd2 Bg5?!

Black isn't playing as incisively as he might, as 19...Ba4! creates new problems for White. Whether or not Black fully exploits the potential in his position, however, White has to take time to worry about such possibilities.

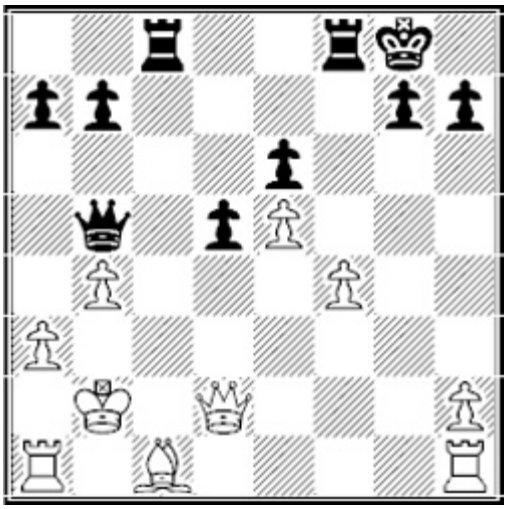
20.Nf4!

Now White is getting somewhere and has almost achieved a winning position, but only by using nine seconds for his last two moves. Even though White's position is improving, it will be difficult for him to convert his advantage because of time.

20...B×f4 21.g×f4

Another trick White had to avoid: 21.B×f2? B×e5+.

21...Qb6 22.B×b5 Q×b5



Now the smoke has cleared, and White is up a piece for a pawn. White's problems are not over, though.

First of all, White has only 23 seconds left, while Black has 37 seconds. Secondly, despite being up a piece, White has to untangle and can't create any immediate threats, whereas Black can create one-move threats fairly easily. This compounds White's time problem, and is yet another example of why the initiative is so essential in bullet.

23.a4 Qb6 24.Ra3 Rc4 25.Rb3 Rfc8!

In the circumstances, this is much stronger than simplifying with 25...Rf×f4.

26.Ka3?! Rc2 27.Qe3?! d4 28.Qh3?

With time pressure looming, White finally cracks. The rest is fairly straightforward.

28...R×c1 29.R×c1 R×c1 30.a5 Qc6 31.Qh5 Ra1+ 32.Kb2 Qc1 mate 0-1

You can't take it with you

As we discussed, there's not much point in losing when you still have lots of time left on the clock. You can only lose once, and anything is better than checkmate. The problem, of course, is that chess is a difficult game, and it isn't always easy to detect danger until it's too late. Hindsight is always 20-20!

Here is a typical example of this sort of false economy, in which the losing player places too much emphasis on time and doesn't pay enough attention

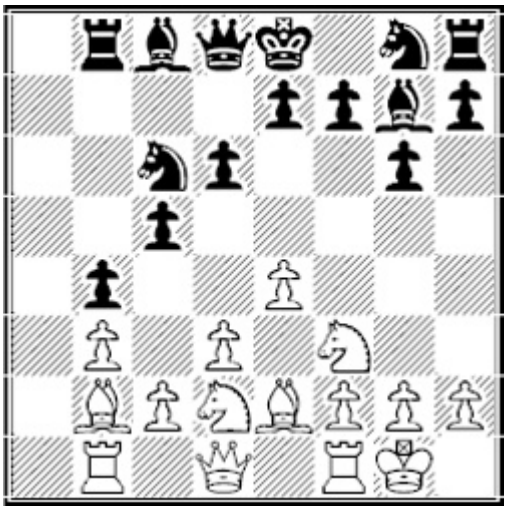
to what is happening on the board. This theme runs though many of the games we will see later on, in a variety of different settings.

White (2029) – Black (2259) [B06]

1.e4 g6 2.d3 Bg7 3.Nd2 d6 4.Ngf3 c5 5.Be2 Nc6 6.0-0

White has approached this game with a concrete idea. He intends to obtain an advantage by playing quickly. Armed with a fixed opening system, which can be played without much regard for Black's moves, coupled with some pre-moves, White has blitzed out his first six moves in less than a second.

6...Rb8 7.a3 b5 8.Rb1 a5 9.b3 b4 10.a×b4 a×b4 11.Bb2



11...B×b2

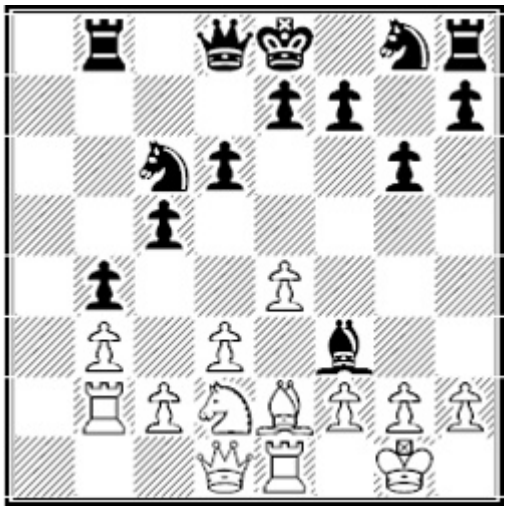
White's unusual pattern of development (for "unusual" read "not too good"), coupled with his continuing rapid pace, almost cost Black here. Black was on the verge of playing 11...Bg4?, and only saw that his g7-bishop was attacked at the last moment. The result: three seconds off

Black’s time, giving White a five-second lead, in exchange for dark-squared weaknesses in White’s position. Not much of a deal for Black...

12.R×b2 Bg4

Black plays to gain greater control over the dark squares. All very positional, but watch what happens next.

13.Re1 B×f3



14.h3?

Clearly a pre-move. To this point, White had used only four seconds, which is pretty impressive. His position is not that good, but with 14.h3? he goes to the pre-move well once too often. Obviously it didn’t occur to him that Black might exchange on f3 without first being nudged with h2-h3.

This game could have been placed in the chapter on pre-move blunders, but really it is an example of poor time management. It’s important to play quickly, but not at all costs.

14...B×e2 15.Q×e2 e6 0-1

Disheartened by the failure of his temporal strategy, White resigned. Black still had 47 seconds to convert his advantage.

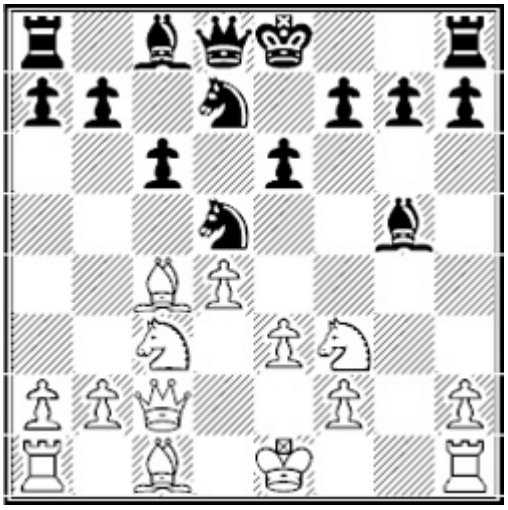
Misuse of time

We now turn to the important topic discussed in the introduction to this chapter – the proper use of time. In the next few games, the losing player fails to use his time wisely and ends up paying the price.

As pointed out earlier, knowing when to use your time and when to trust your instincts and move quickly is one of the greatest challenges of bullet. Moving intuitively often involves making “second best moves.” It is essential not so much to decide on the right move to make, but rather to assess the position with sufficient accuracy so that you don’t miss a critical moment, where only the best move will do. Developing a feel for the critical moment is one of the most important components of bullet mastery.

White (2943) – Black (2510) [D45]

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Nf3 e6 5.e3 Nbd7 6.Qc2 Be7 7.g4 d×c4 8.g5 Nd5 9.B×c4 B×g5



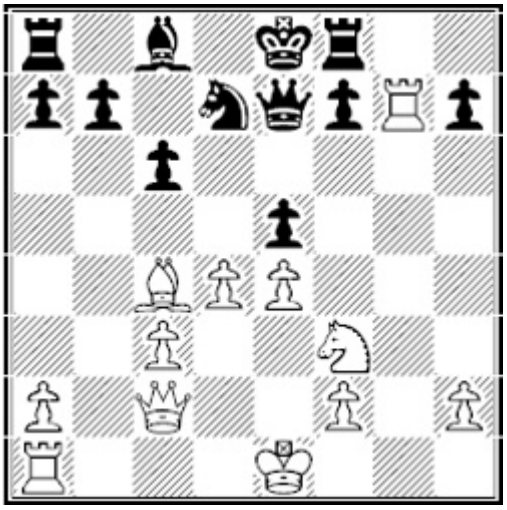
Black calls White's bluff! At this point, Black has a two-second time advantage, but uses eight seconds on this move. 9...B×g5!? picks up a pawn, but does not lead to anything forcing beyond that. Using this much time just to win a pawn cannot be recommended. Such long thinks should be reserved for do-or-die positions.

It is impossible to assign time a concrete value in bullet. It's bad enough that chess players think in terms of a queen being worth "nine points," a rook "five points," and so on. Let's just say that time, like money, is important if you don't have enough of it.

10.Rg1 Bf6 11.e4 N×c3 12.b×c3 e5 13.Ba3

13.Ba3 is an annoying move which creates vague possibilities of threats, without giving the opponent any obvious way of combating them.

13...Be7?! 14.B×e7 Q×e7 15.R×g7 Rf8



Black’s nervous 13...Be7?! has cost him his extra pawn, and White now stands better. In a bullet game, however, one would have to say the chances are roughly equal.

16.Ng5?!

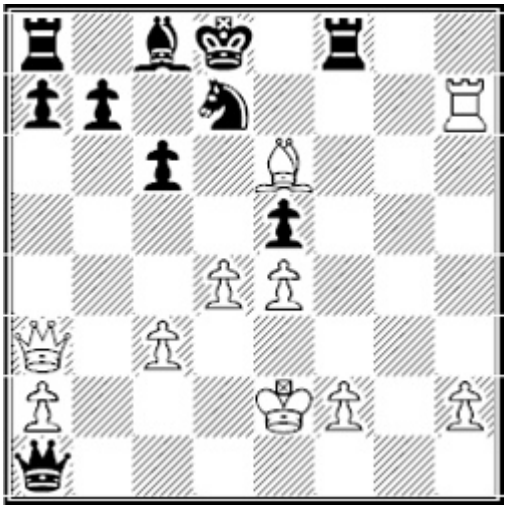
This seemingly strong move creates threats against Black’s f7- and h7-pawns. White played this move instantly in order to retain a seven-second time edge (47 seconds remaining for White, 40 seconds for Black).

Unfortunately, 16.Ng5?! runs into a slight snag...

16...Qf6! 17.B×f7+ Ke7 18.R×h7 Q×g5 19.Qb3!?

Black has found the best defense and now has an objectively winning position. It is here that the concept of bluff really come into play, as White tries to keep the pressure on his opponent in order to run him out of time. Black took seven seconds before (correctly) deciding to go after White’s a1-rook, leaving him with 28 seconds.

19...Qg1+! 20.Ke2 Q×a1 21.Be6+ Kd8 22.Qa3



The critical position in the game. White has 35 seconds left, while Black has 27 seconds. Black thought for ten seconds at this point, and failed to find 22...c5!, which cuts White's queen off from the attack. After 23.B×d7 B×d7 24.Q×c5 Qa2+ it is White, not Black, who gets mated, so 22...c5! leaves White in big trouble.

The move actually played by Black still leaves him with an advantage, and while Black's long thinks (in bullet terms!) may not have been justified earlier, in this position Black was fully justified in spending time, although it would have been even better to have found the best move!

22...e×d4?! 23.B×d7?!

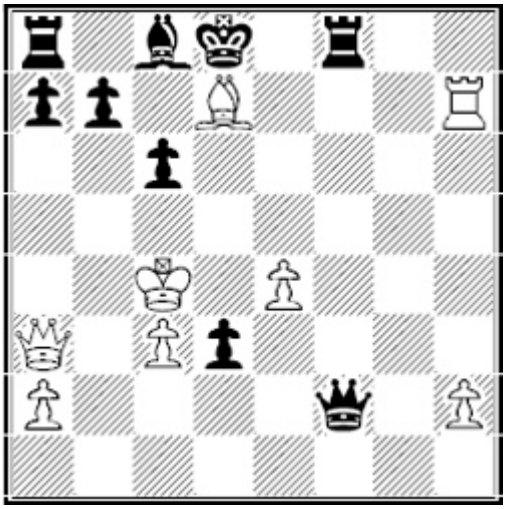
Now it's White's turn to think (for 12 seconds), as he is on the verge of defeat. 23.Qe7+ Kc7 24.Q×f8 was better, but after 24...d3+!, White is still in trouble. The most important thing to remember in such situations is to not panic and trust your instincts when the other ideas you look at don't seem to work.

White now has 23 seconds remaining, Black 17 seconds.

23...d3+!

Another excellent move by Black, which keeps White under severe pressure.

24.Ke3 Qe1+ 25.Kd4 Q×f2+ 26.Kc4



Since playing 22...e×d4, Black has made all of his moves in one second or less, and only trails by three seconds on the clock. They've been good moves, too!

Unfortunately, here Black freezes and blows it, taking five seconds for a losing move. Having defended his f8-rook with 25...Q×f2+, he hurries to capture White's d7-bishop, overlooking White's mating attack. 26...b5+! wins, as after 27.Kb3 Qc2+! (leaving Black's f8-rook undefended!) 28.Kb4 a5+, Black has a mating attack.

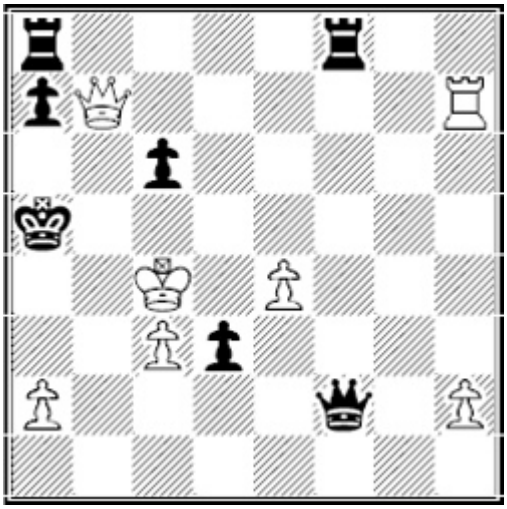
26...B×d7? 27.Qe7+

Black still has 13 seconds left, but time is no longer important.

27...Kc7

Black used half his remaining time on this move. He likely was in shock at the sudden change in fortune, but since 27...Kc8 loses immediately, Black should have played 27...Kc7 right away and at least forced White to find the win on his own time.

28.Q×d7+ Kb6 29.Q×b7+ Ka5



30.Rh5+!

This far from obvious, but crushing, move is the only way to win.

30...c5

Hoping for 31.R×c5+? Q×c5+, avoiding mate, but with only three seconds left, even that wouldn't have helped.

31.Qb5 mate 1-0

White (2379) – Black (2905) [A02]

1.f4 e6 2.e4 g6 3.Nf3 Bg7 4.d4 d5 5.Nc3 b6 6.e5 c5?

6...a6 was a better alternative, followed by 7...Nd7 and 8...c5.

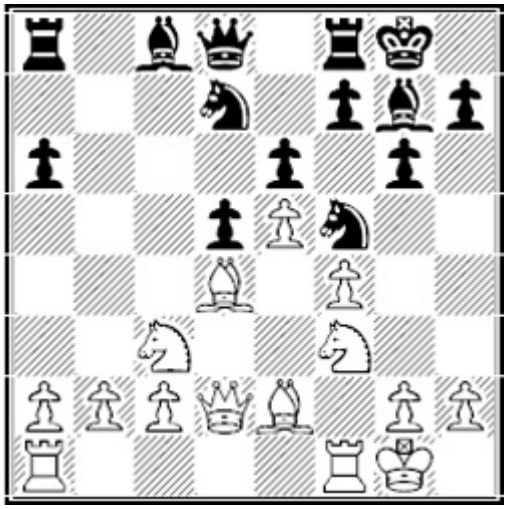
7.Be3

A perfectly playable move, but 7.Nb5! was more incisive, as Black either allows 8.Nd6+ or retreats with 7 ...Bf8, allowing 8.c4!?.

7...a6?!

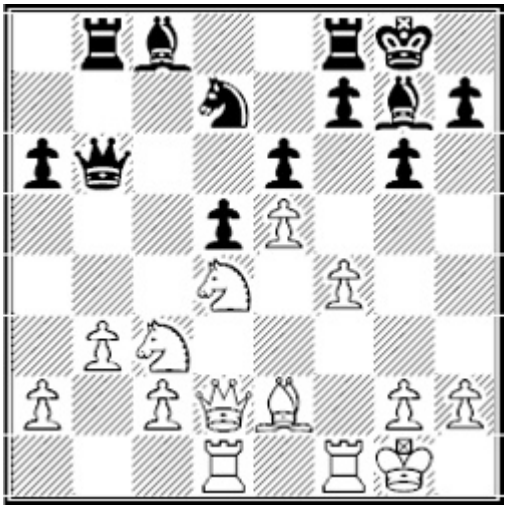
Rather than allow Nc3-b5-d6+, Black gives up a pawn. 7...c×d4 was better. Now Black gets into trouble.

8.d×c5 b×c5 9.B×c5 Ne7 10.Qd2 0-0 11.Be2 Nd7 12.Bd4 Nf5 13.0-0



After outplaying Black in the opening, White has reached a middlegame with an extra pawn, while preventing Black from obtaining any real counterplay. White has 49 seconds remaining, while Black has 48 seconds.

13...Rb8 14.b3 N×d4 15.N×d4 Qb6 16.Rad1



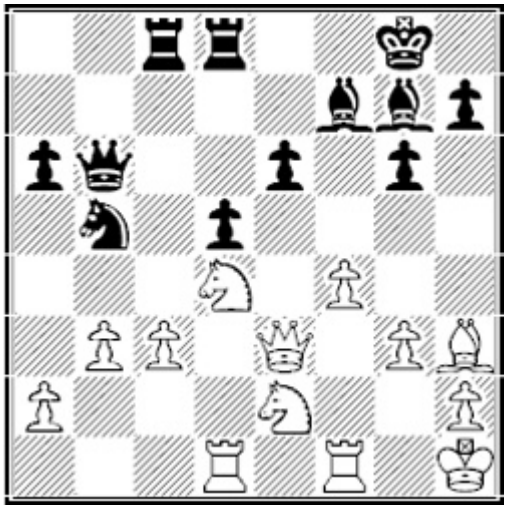
16...f6!

One of the most important goals in one-minute chess is to create play. This is especially true when one is either behind in material or positionally worse – both of which happen to be the case in this position.

17.e×f6 N×f6 18.Kh1 Bd7 19.Bf3 Rbc8 20.Nce2 Rfd8 21.c3 Be8 22.Qe3 Bf7 23.g3 Ne8 24.Bg2 Nd6

White has maintained his cool up to this point and has managed his time well, as he still has 39 seconds left. But now he allows unnecessary counterplay and also uses three seconds on his next move. The simple 25.Rd3 would have avoided complications.

25.Bh3?! Nb5!



Creating counterplay. 25...Ne4!? was also possible, as White has no easy way to deal with Black's e4-knight, but 25...Nb5!? caught White off balance and he again uses three seconds for his response, leaving him five seconds behind on time.

26.B×e6 B×e6 27.Q×e6+ Q×e6 28.N×e6 Re8 29.N6d4

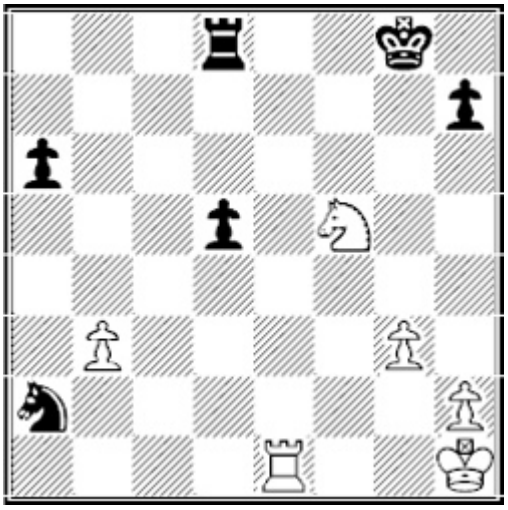
29.N×g7? would be worse, as after 29...R×e2 White's g7-knight would be trapped. 29.f5! g×f5 30.N6f4 was best.

29...B×d4 30.N×d4 N×c3 31.Rde1?!

White weakens under the pressure. Despite allowing Black some tactical chances, White has kept his wits about him and would still have had a nice position with an extra pawn after 31.Rd2.

However, after 31.Rde1?!, White's remaining advantage is very small, while he trails by three seconds on the clock (White has 29 seconds remaining, Black 32 seconds).

31...N×a2 32.f5 g×f5 33.N×f5 R×e1 34.R×e1 Rd8



34...Rc3!? was even stronger, but putting a rook behind a passed pawn is rarely bad.

35.Re7

White cannot resist going for the kill. After blowing a big advantage, it is hard to be content with a move like 35.Nd4 with a possible technical win, especially while trailing on the clock.

35...d4!

Once again, Black plays the obvious move. In order to be successful in simplified positions, one has to always be looking for the most direct counterplay while avoiding simple tactics. If no tactic comes to mind right away, moves like 35...d4 should be played instantly.

36.Rg7+

A critical juncture in the game. At this point both sides were about even on time, but here White used an astounding six seconds! Presumably he was calculating the line 36.Nh6+ Kf8 37.R×h7 Rd5, after which it is hard to

stop Black's d4-pawn. But really White's problem is that he has outplayed Black for most of the game and has avoided all the traps Black has managed to set. It just isn't fair that White still isn't winning!

36...Kh8 37.Ra7

White used another eight seconds for 37.Ra7. According to some less-than-human friends, 37.Rg4 is equal (37...d3 38.Nh6 Rf8 39.Rd4). However, being short of time, it was hard for White to find this variation, especially since 37.Rg4 is counter-intuitive, as it only makes Black advance his d-pawn. Because of the time he took on his last two moves, White now has 12 seconds left, while Black has 22 seconds.

37...d3 38.R×a6 d2 39.Ne3 Nc3 40.Rc6 Re8!

A strong move, after which the result is not in doubt.

41.R×c3 R×e3 42.R×e3 d1Q+ 43.Kg2 Qd2+ 44.Kf3

White's king must defend his rook.

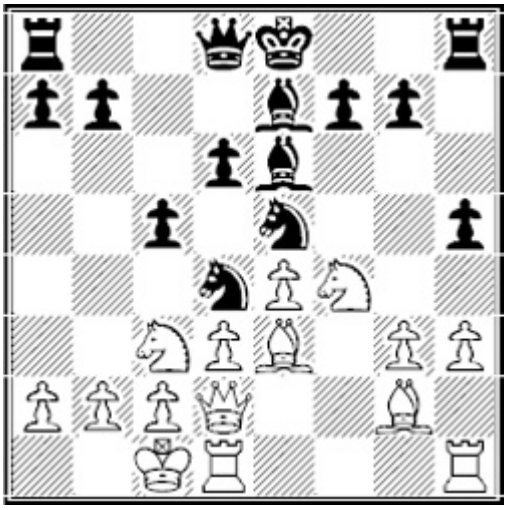
44...Q×h2 0-1

White resigned, with only six seconds left, while Black had 17 seconds.

In the next game, Black makes an all-too-human mistake.

White (1987) – Black (2005) [A00]

1.g3 c5 2.Bg2 Nc6 3.d3 e5 4.Nc3 d6 5.e4 h5 6.h3 Nge7 7.Nge2 Ng6 8.Be3 Be7 9.Qd2 Nd4 10.f4 e×f4 11.N×f4 Ne5 12. 0-0-0 Be6



After an interesting opening, White has an edge, in part because his control of d5 cannot be easily contested, while Black's d4-knight can be evicted by c2-c3; and in part because Black's king will have trouble finding a safe haven. These are fairly esoteric considerations in a bullet game, mind you. As compensation, Black has a slight lead in time, having 49 seconds left, against White's 45 seconds. White's next move tries to make the most of his on-board advantages, but it turns out to have quite a different effect.

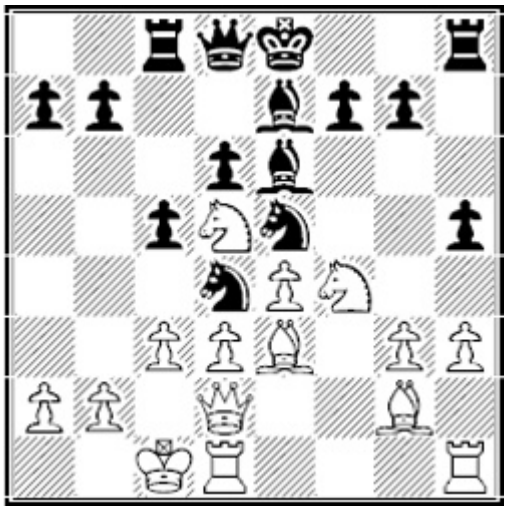
13.Ncd5! Rc8?!

Here Black started to make what is often a fatal mistake in bullet – he became interested in the position. 13...Rc8?! is no better or worse than a number of reasonable alternatives, objectively speaking, but Black took nine seconds to make it, which is a very poor use of time in a non-critical position.

14.c3! ***(D)***

The strength of this move, which White played instantly, is not that it threatens to capture Black's d4-knight, but rather that it doesn't! The

obvious question is what is the point of 14.c3!, since 15.c×d4 c×d4+ 16.Kb1 d×e3 doesn't lead to much for White?



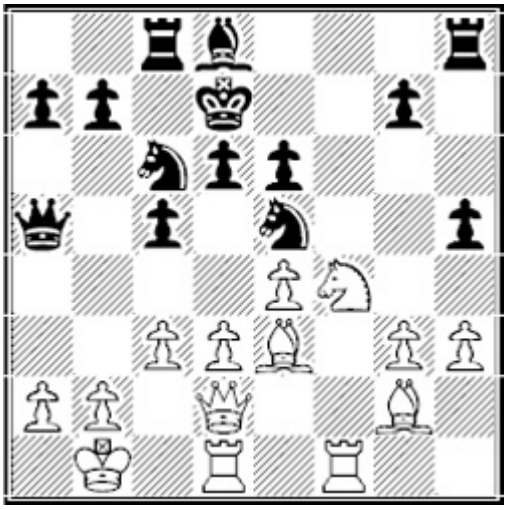
Realizing that his opponent is becoming absorbed in the game, White deliberately chooses a move which gives Black a wide range of responses. Many players would find the diagrammed position interesting, as it has the potential to resolve itself into almost any type of middle game. In tournament chess, either player might have a long think at this point in the game. But in bullet, that's not possible, and taking more than even a few seconds on a move in this type of position can be fatal.

14...Ndc6?

Black took 13 (!) seconds for this move, which anticipates 15.Kb1. 14...Ndc6? isn't a bad move, but in bullet spending that much time on a non-critical move is the equivalent of dropping a piece.

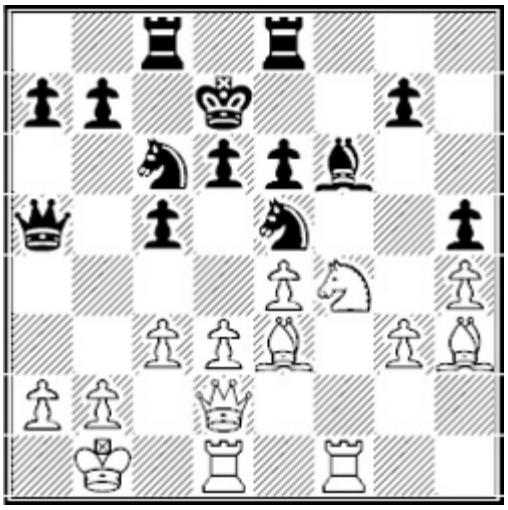
With a 16-second lead in time, White need only keep the game going on even terms to win.

15.Kb1 Qa5 16.Rhf1 Bd8 17.N×e6 f×e6 18.Nf4 Kd7



White now has a 20-second lead in time (38 seconds to 18 seconds) and naturally plays for the attack, while trying to avoid too many forcing lines. It is often easier to meet direct threats than it is to answer moves which threaten to make threats.

19.h4! Bf6 20.Bh3 Rhe8



21.N×e6?

Not only was 21.N×h5 stronger in absolute terms, but 21.N×e6? resolves much of the tension in the position. With Black having only 14 seconds left,

White should keep the pot boiling so that Black is less sure of what to do.

21...R×e6

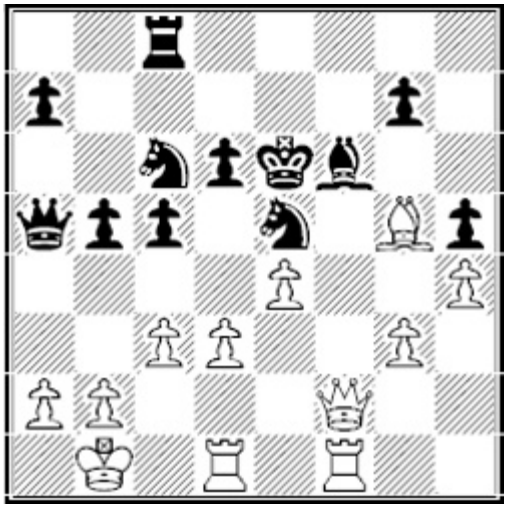
As it turns out, White's last move might have surprised Black slightly, as he took two seconds to capture White's knight. Given his time problems, he ought to have pre-moved 21...R×e6 so as not to waste any time recapturing on e6 should it be legal to do so.

22.B×e6+ K×e6 23.Bg5 b5?!

Since White still has some threats, 23...Ng4 was safer, but the real problem with 23...b5?! is that Black took another three seconds on it, leaving him with only eight seconds for the rest of the game.

With no real attack and potential problems with his own king, Black's time problems are now terminal.

24.Qf2?!



White isn't playing very precisely, but he's playing quickly.

24...B×g5?

Black's time-trouble finally results in a real blunder. After 24...Ne7!, Black would still be in the game, although with only five seconds left it wouldn't make any difference.

25.Qf5+ Ke7 26.Q×c8 Bf6 27.d4 c×d4 28.c×d4 Nc4 29.Q×c6 1-0

Black lost on time. White had 23 seconds left.

The flip side of spending too much time in a non-critical position is failing to spend enough time when it matters. This sort of judgment call can also be very difficult to make, as a player may be convinced that there is a mate and spend a lot of time looking for it, only to find that it was a mirage.

If a player correctly assesses a position and the mate is there, but it can't be found, that's another issue. This book doesn't address the question of basic chess strength, so instead we remind players of an admonition from another book – *seek and ye shall find*.

In the next game, Black pays dearly for the mistake of failing to seek.

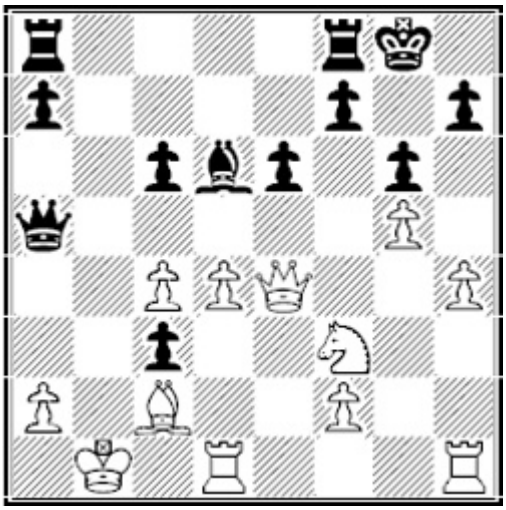
White (3026) – Black (2426) [B11]

1.e4 c6 2.Nc3 d5 3.Nf3 d×e4 4.N×e4 Nf6 5.Neg5 Bg4 6.h3 B×f3 7.N×f3 e6 8.Bc4 Nbd7 9.d4 Nb6 10.Bd3 Bd6 11.c3 Nbd5 12.Qe2 Nf4 13.B×f4 B×f4 14.g3 Bd6 15.0-0-0 0-0 16.Kb1 Qa5 17.g4 b5 18.g5 Nd5 19.Qe4 g6 20.h4 b4! 21.c4 Nc3+!

This initiates a very strong counter-attack on the queenside which is completely justified. Black cannot sit back and be overrun on the kingside,

so the whole idea of ...b7-b5-b4 and 21...Nc3+! is correct.

22.b×c3 b×c3 23.Bc2?



At this point White has 48 seconds left, while Black has 46 seconds, so time is not yet a significant factor. White's last move did not offer the strongest resistance, but now Black blunders and misses 23...Qa3!, which would have forced immediate mate.

23...Rab8+?

This hasty check, played after one second of thought, throws away the win. It's easy to call 23...Rab8+? a mistake, but Black's real error was failing to pause for even a few seconds in order to find the win.

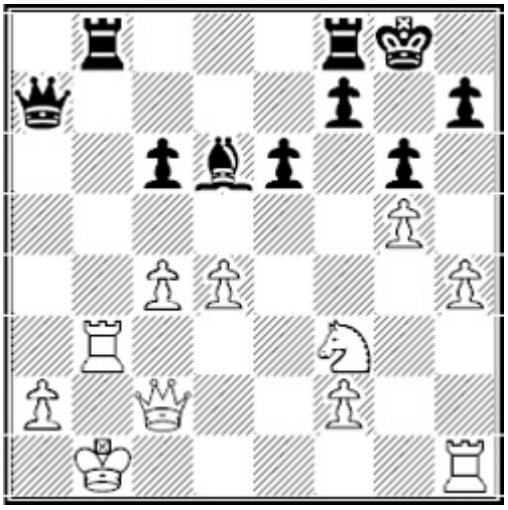
It might have been that Black couldn't believe the win could be so easy, or he might have simply failed to assess the position correctly. Regardless, it is important in bullet games to recognize the need to take time and think at the critical moment, especially when a sacrifice has transformed the position. This is not to say that players should necessarily go into a deep think which commits them to finding a forced win, but rather that it is important to be

alert and take advantage of the opportunity to create the irresistible mating threats which make time considerations secondary.

24.Bb3 Qa3 25.Qc2

Although Black missed his chance to force mate, the game is still far from over and both sides have chances.

25...a5! 26.Rd3 a4 27.R×c3 a×b3 28.R×b3 Qa7



29.Kc1!?

A risky but not necessarily bad idea. With both players moving more or less instantly at this point, White plans to run his king to the center, where direct threats by Black will take time and some creativity.

At this point, Black has a four-second time advantage, with 43 seconds left against White’s 39 seconds. However, instead of looking for the knockout blow, Black continues to just move quickly, allowing White to get his king to the safety of the center.

Black's focus on playing quickly, without regard to the opportunities on the board, ultimately proves his undoing. In this sense, his error falls into the category of "tunnel vision," which often occurs in normal chess, when a player gets obsessed with a single idea. We shall explore this topic later. Here Black is thinking only of the clock, rather than what is happening on the board.

The "knockout blow" here, incidentally, is 29...R×b3! 30.a×b3 (30.Q×b3 Rb8 31.Qc2 Qa3+) Qa1+ 31.Qb1 Qc3+ and 32... Q×f3.

29...c5 30.Kd2 Bf4+ 31.Ke2 c×d4 32.Rd1

Black still has the advantage, but he has no direct threats and White's knight has more squares available to it than does Black's dark-squared bishop. White has come a long way in a relatively few moves, and whatever difficulties he faces now are nothing compared to the problems he had earlier.

32...Qa8?

Giving away his advantage. 32...e5 was much better. The mate Black hastily missed nine moves ago is starting to look more and more important.

33.R×d4 e5 34.Rd5 R×b3 35.a×b3 e4 36.Nd2

36.Ne5 was possible, but White intends to bring his knight to f6, in order to create threats against Black's king.

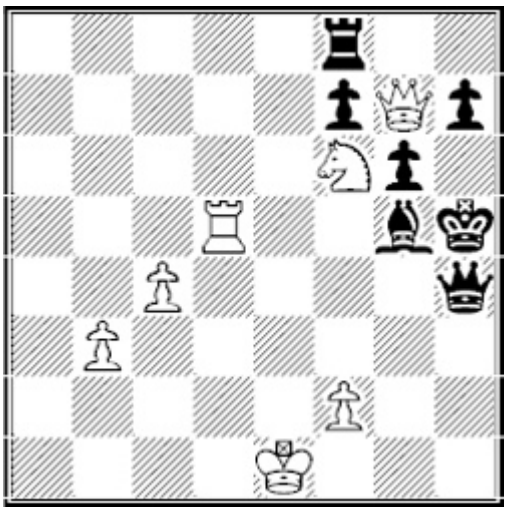
36...Qc8 37.N×e4 Qg4+ 38.Ke1 Q×h4?

After 38...Qg1+ 39.Ke2 Qg4+, White would have played 40.Kd3.

39.Nf6+ Kg7 40.Qc3!

Setting up a mating net.

40...B×g5 41.Ne8+ Kh6 42.Qg7+ Kh5 43.Nf6 mate 1-0



Black maintained his time advantage right to the end, with White having 26 seconds when the game ended, against Black's 33 seconds. In the most literal sense, this was a true one-minute game! But all Black's time advantage meant in the end was that he had more time to look at the final position.

This game is a fine example of why time is not all that matters in bullet chess. Throughout the game Black made many obvious moves while using very little time, but he missed several chances to put the game away due to "playing on the clock." Time is important, but it's meant to be used.

Chapter 4

Pre-moving and Other Creatures

Pre-moving is perhaps the most important technical feature of online bullet chess and arguably only pre-moving makes it possible to play a decent (we use the term advisably) game of chess in one minute. It is certainly possible to play bullet without pre-moving, but anyone who does so is giving his or her opponent a big advantage in time every game. Pre-moving is worth several hundred rating points, provided it is done properly.

How to pre-move

In the *Blitzin* program commonly used on the Internet Chess Club, the pre-moving feature is activated as follows:

* right click on “Options” to activate the drop-down menu;

* right click on “Move Input”, to activate another drop-down menu; and

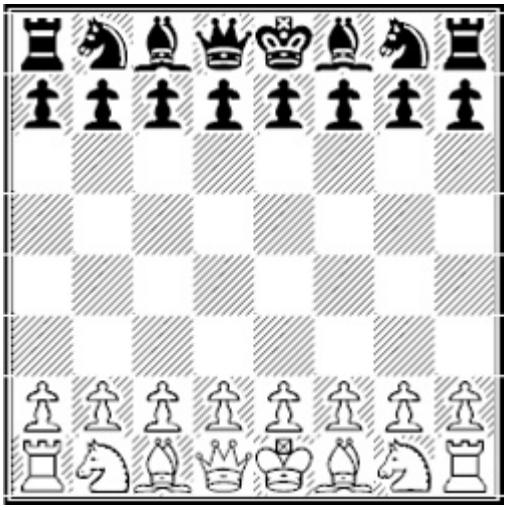
* right click on “Premove.”

Other programs have similar features. Once you have taken these steps, you can unleash the power of pre-moving.

Pre-moving itself is very simple and intuitive. All you do is input your move when it is your opponent’s turn to move. If the move is legal once your opponent has moved, it will be made almost instantly (commonly in a

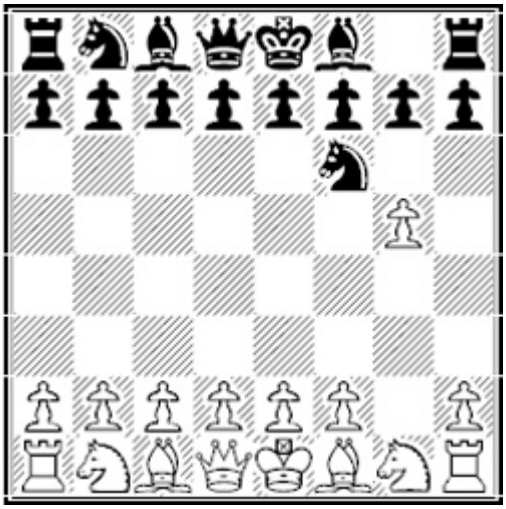
tenth of a second). If it is not legal, the pre-move is cancelled and nothing will happen. Then you have to regroup and move normally.

Let’s consider the following position, which arises quite often:



When the game starts, White’s time begins to run. White can play whatever he likes, but he can’t pre-move, because Black’s time isn’t yet running. But Black can. If Black plays the Alekhine Defense against 1.e4 (1...Nf6) and is comfortable playing 1...Nf6 against 1.d4, he can and should pre-move 1...Nf6. 1...Nf6 is a relatively “safe” pre-move, because 1...Nf6 is a reasonable reply to any first move by White. There is nothing White can play on his first move which leaves Black with a serious disadvantage were he to answer with 1...Nf6.

Still, Black has to balance the time saved by pre-moving 1...Nf6 against losing the option to answer 1.c4 with 1...e5 (if that’s what he would normally play in a slower game). Black also has to be prepared to play a few positions that not only might be outside his normal opening repertoire, but really shouldn’t arise at all, such as the strange 1.g4 Nf6 (pre-moved) 2.g5:



Where does Black's knight go now? We don't know and we don't really care, but you can be sure that there won't be any opening theory on this position! That, of course, is part of the beauty of bullet chess. Positions often arise in the super-heated bullet universe that can't exist in the cooler universe of normal chess (no chess book would be complete without a cosmological analogy).

What you see

When a pre-move is made, an arrow appears on the board to indicate the move. The arrow begins in the square containing the piece being pre-moved and ends in the destination square, reflecting the mouse drag which inputted the move. Pre-moves, like any other moves, may also be inputted by typing in the move using the keyboard, but few players play this way if they have a choice.

Your opponent does *not* see the arrow, so only the player who is pre-moving knows that a pre-move has been made and what it is. The reason for this is fairly obvious. If you knew your opponent's pre-moves, you could win easily by exploiting them.

Canceling a pre-move

By definition, pre-moves are made quickly, even in bullet terms. You must pre-move on your opponent's time, so pre-moves are often made almost as part of your actual move. It may be, though, that after literally a moment's reflection you decide that the pre-move you have selected is unwise. If your opponent moves before you can do anything, your fears may well turn out to be justified. But if you are fast enough, you can cancel the pre-move.

This can be done in two ways. If you right click on the piece being pre-moved, the pre-move simply disappears and you are in exactly the same situation as if you had never made it in the first place. You can then make a different pre-move, or even reinstate your original pre-move.

Alternatively, if you want to make a different pre-move, you can bypass the cancellation described above and input a new pre-move. The new pre-move will then override the previous one.

When to pre-move

Inexperienced bullet players may not even be aware of the pre-move feature, and rarely use it even if they are. It takes some getting used to, but the importance of pre-moving can't be over-emphasized.

The basic principle is very simple – you should pre-move as often as possible! The time saved is often critical, and a player who is pre-moving will quickly gain a time advantage of five, ten or more seconds. In many bullet games, such an advantage will be decisive, and is definitely the equivalent of a significant material advantage, such as an extra piece or more.

For the player who is getting used to pre-moving, it is not a bad idea to start slowly, although we hope that won't be taken literally! If you pre-move only a few times a game that's much better than not at all. Once you get the hang of it you will find that you pre-move more and more often, frequently by instinct without even realizing it.

The best way to start is to pre-move when there is no risk, then work your way up to more dangerous pre-moves.

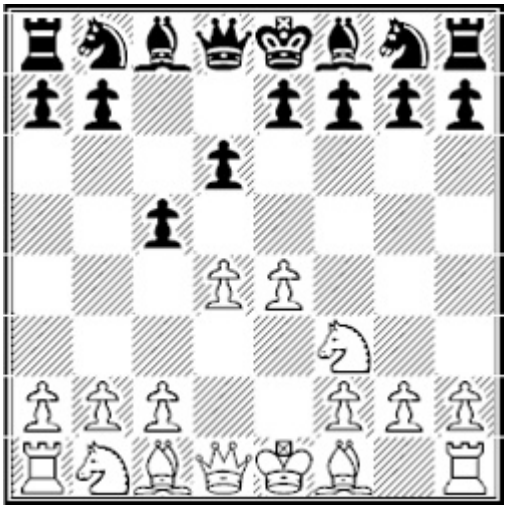
Safe pre-moves

The safest pre-moves of all are "only" moves, where no legal alternatives exist. There is no need to give an example of such a pre-move, but it is worth stressing that there is no reason at all not to pre-move in such a position. After all, if you have no choice as to your move, why take more than a tenth of a second to make it?

A less trivial example involves recaptures. The position at the top of the next column has arisen in millions of games.

While different move orders can lead to this position, normally it arises in the Open Sicilian after 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4.

We are not concerned with the complexities of the Sicilian Defense, which have filled many longer – and we think less interesting – books than this one. We are more interested in what White has done while waiting for Black's third move.



In the diagrammed position, White absolutely should pre-move 4.N×d4, provided of course that's how he intends to reply to 3...c×d4 (4.Q×d4 is a viable option and 4.c3 is playable, especially in a bullet game). White should pre-move 4.N×d4 because there is no reason not to.

4.N×d4 is a pre-move with no risk. If Black plays something other than 3...c×d4, 4.N×d4 will be cancelled automatically as though it had never been attempted. A sophisticated White player will realize that 3...Nf6 is playable for Black, but White would be fooling only himself if he thought that he was being clever by not pre-moving a recapture on d4. The 4.N×d4 pre-move in no way precludes White from responding to 3...Nf6 in some other way – in fact it compels him to, because 4.N×d4 would be illegal after 3...Nf6 or any other move than 3...c×d4.

The astute reader will by now have realized that 4.Q×d4 is an equally safe pre-move, because it also would only be played after 3...c×d4. Simple recaptures are therefore almost always safe pre-moves which should be made as a matter of course – even when the opponent's capture is unlikely.

It is easy to find other examples of safe pre-moves. If you can be sure what your opponent will play, as is often the case when you have just played a forcing move, you can pre-move with absolute confidence. The catch, though, is just how sure can you really be as to what your opponent will play, which brings us to the next category of pre-moves.

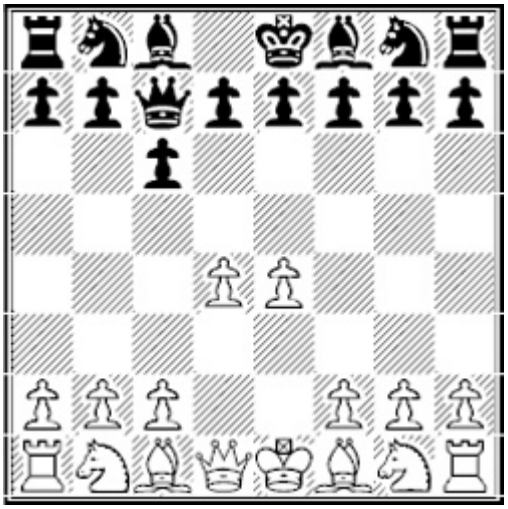
Semi-safe pre-moves

When we discuss forcing moves, it is important to distinguish between truly forcing moves, where there is only one legal reply, and apparently forcing moves, where there is only one rational reply. The difference is similar to that between absolute pins and relative pins.

An absolute pin arises when a piece is pinned to its king and can't legally move. A relative pin is different. If the pinned piece moves a more valuable piece will be exposed to capture, but the move is still legal. In normal chess, many combinations involve seemingly impossible moves by pinned pieces, but the "impossibility" is purely a construct of the players' minds. The description "relative" makes this clear. When a white bishop pins a black knight to Black's queen, the immobility of Black's knight stems from the relative values of White's bishop and Black's queen. If Black's knight can start a decisive attack by moving out of the pin, everything changes.

In bullet, pre-moves are safe if the opponent's move is truly forced, because you can be sure that the pre-move will go ahead as planned. However, once your opponent has options, pre-moves start involving an element of risk. As discussed earlier, if none of the opponent's options are dangerous, then the pre-move is still safe. The possibility of even one dangerous move changes the equation and introduces an element of risk.

Consider the position after 1.e4 c6 2.d4 Qc7?!



2...Qc7?! is not a particularly good move and White obviously has no reason to be afraid of it. He can continue with 3.Nc3, 3.Nf3 or other moves, with a comfortable game. So what is Black up to?

Black's hope is that White will start pre-moving and overlook the possibility that Black can play 3...Q×h2?! Of course this loses unless White has pre-moved, but it would be easy for White to think that Black has no threats at all so early in the game. After 3.Nc3 Q×h2?! 4.R×h2 White wins, but after 3.Nc3 Q×h2?! 4.Nf3? (pre-moved) 4...Q×h1, it's quite a different story.

The best players play semi-safe pre-moves frequently. They play the odds. Often the odds are pretty good. When you capture an opposing piece, it's likely your opponent will recapture it. It's reasonably safe to pre-move in such circumstances, even though there's a possibility that your opponent will cross you up by throwing in an "in-between" move rather than recapturing. In deciding whether to risk a semi-safe pre-move, the following factors should be considered:

- how likely is it that your opponent won’t make the expected move?
- if your opponent makes an unexpected move, how likely is it that your pre-move will be punished?
- how severe will the punishment be?

As we have seen, when a truly forcing move has been made, there is no chance your opponent will make an unexpected move, so pre-moving is absolutely safe. But even if your opponent surprises you, that doesn’t mean he will make a move which exploits your pre-move. That will depend on the position and the move he makes. In the previous example, only 3...Q×h2?! exploited a pre-move by White on his fourth move. Against any other move, White would have a reasonable position. There was no chance of Black accidentally exploiting White’s pre-move – only the kamikaze attack by Black’s queen would do the job.

As for the third factor, in bullet it is possible to recover from almost any setback except for checkmate. If a pre-move costs a piece, the time gained may be worth it, especially if the setback occurs after five or six pre-moves, which presumably have given you a significant time advantage. When we say that a five-second time edge is worth a piece, that’s sometimes not just a figure of speech! If you are pre-moving consistently, it may sometimes cost you a piece or more to get that time advantage.

Risky pre-moves

It is easy to see that there is a spectrum of risk for pre-moves and that in some positions pre-moving can be reckless. Just as in normal chess a weakness that cannot be exploited is unimportant, in bullet pre-moves that

go unpunished are fine, no matter how risky they might have been. In the next chapter we will discuss “pre-move blunders” in detail, but these “blunders” are brilliant when you get away with them!

Why do some players play risky pre-moves that only work if their opponents play just the right moves? It’s fun, for one thing, and can also be very effective because of the time advantage associated with pre-moving. Like all gamblers, pre-move addicts have trouble knowing when to stop, and it is a rare bullet player who can build up a big time advantage by pre-moving, then calmly win over the board. It’s human nature to go with what got you there – and in bullet those who live by the pre-move often die by the pre-move.

In a bad position where you are behind on time, risky pre-moves are often the only chance and really you’re risking very little by making them, since otherwise you are just going to lose. If you are overmatched, it might also be that your best chance against a stronger opponent is to throw caution to the wind and start pre-moving. One can therefore rationalize risky pre-moving, but it would be disingenuous to emphasize this. The most common explanation for risky pre-moving is that the players who do it are a bit crazy, and more power to them. Bullet lets people express their true nature...

Most players, though, make risky pre-moves without realizing it, either because they haven’t correctly assessed the position on the board or because they have misjudged the psychological factors involved.

Psychology

Someone with Atriedes-like prescience would be a formidable bullet player because if you always knew what your opponent would play you could pre-

move all the time. Somehow the strongest bullet players appear to have this ability. Are they actually mutants or space aliens who can read their opponents' minds, or is there a simpler explanation?

Opinions differ on this question, but an understanding of chess psychology is a critically important part of pre-moving. The more you can anticipate what your opponent is thinking and what he or she will do next, the better you will do. This applies both in normal chess and, to an even greater extent, in bullet.

One often reads how a losing player bemoans the fact that he was constantly surprised by his opponent's moves and therefore couldn't play well. This is not to say that all surprises in chess are unpleasant – a terrible move by an opponent may be surprising but not unwelcome – but it is disconcerting to find yourself confused and disoriented by your opponent's play. Similarly, if your opponent's moves are expected, it is much easier to counter them and set traps which take advantage of them. In bullet, the same considerations apply on the board, with the added benefit of pre-moving. If you can regularly foresee what your opponent is going to play, you can pre-move with a low degree of risk and either build up a time advantage or force your opponent to play above his or her speed limit, with the inevitable result.

The importance of psychology is one of the themes which runs though this book and it is explored in subsequent chapters. For now, it is enough to make the point that it is an understanding of psychology, not mind-reading, which gives the strongest bullet players their pre-moving powers.

Smart-moving

We would be remiss not to mention a lesser-known feature – smart-moving. Smart-moving is activated using the same menu as pre-moving, and is an even more volatile weapon than pre-moving.

Smart-moves are made by right clicking on a piece. If that piece can make only one legal move, it will make it. If the piece may make more than one move, nothing will happen.

As with pre-moves, smart-moves can be made with pawns as well as pieces.

Smart-moving is faster than dragging a piece, because no additional hand motion is required. This is particularly useful in endgames, when a pawn is rushing to the queening square. If the pawn can't capture anything it can only go forward one square, and simply clicking on the pawn is the most efficient way to input the move.

Smart-moves can be used less frequently than pre-moves and can also rebound against the player trying to make them. If you click on a piece to smart-move it and your opponent plays an unanticipated move, the resulting move may be anything but smart. There is also a danger of accidentally making a smart-move once you activate the smart-move feature. Many players do not use smart-move.

Mouse slips

It is a mistake to think that every bullet move is intentional. This book contains many examples of "mouse slips," where a piece is accidentally moved to the wrong square. Even in normal chess this can happen, although the motor skills required to move a piece on a chess board when the time

control is 40 moves in 90 minutes are a bit less demanding than those required in bullet.

There is no magic solution for mouse slips. They usually are a result of fatigue, although some players seem more prone to them than others. Switching to another game wouldn't help those players because if they weren't dropping a rook they would be ramming their star cruiser into an asteroid, so just keep playing.

Speaking of mice...

It is possible to play chess online without using a mouse just by typing your moves on the keyboard. Move numbers and other finesses aren't required – "Nf6" becomes 1...Nf6 on the board, and so on.

Needless to say, even for the most accomplished typist, this is a cumbersome way to play. It is remarkable how quickly some players can play using a keyboard, but they are even faster when they use a mouse.

In one rare situation, however, typing in your moves can be very useful. Most players play with the "Always Queen" feature activated, which causes all promoted pawns to automatically queen. From time to time, however, it may be necessary to promote to a rook (to avoid stalemate), to a knight (to fork) or, once in a chess lifetime, to a bishop. It's theoretically possible to turn off the "Always Queen" feature, then promote the pawn, then select the desired piece, although by then you probably will have run out of time. It is much faster just to type in the under-promoting move. It can also be very annoying to forget to reset "Always Queen," then lose the next game on time...

Chapter 5

Pre-moving Blunders

Pre-moving can be a powerful weapon, as the time gained by pre-moving can be decisive. Pre-moving can give you more time to think in critical positions, and at the same time can deny your opponent the same time. Even before time actually becomes a critical factor, a succession of pre-moves can create psychological pressure on an opponent, who may panic just at the thought of running short of time.

But like all powerful weapons, pre-moves can rebound against the player using them, especially when they are used recklessly. As we have discussed, there are pre-moves which are completely safe and should always be made, as a matter of habit. At the other extreme, there are nonsensical pre-moves which invite disaster. In between, however, are the difficult pre-moves which involve a certain element of risk. How much risk is justified is a matter of conjecture and hindsight; how much risk a player is willing to take is more a matter of style and personality.

In this chapter we look at some failed pre-moves, in the hope that these negative examples will illustrate some of the dangers of pre-moving, as well as offer some insight into how to exploit injudicious pre-moving by your opponents.

Pre-moving can be costly in different ways, as the examples in this chapter show. Perhaps the most obvious consequence of an ill-considered pre-move is the failure to meet an unanticipated threat. But pre-moves can also result

in missed opportunities, as committing to a pre-move may prevent you from exploiting an unforeseen enemy blunder.

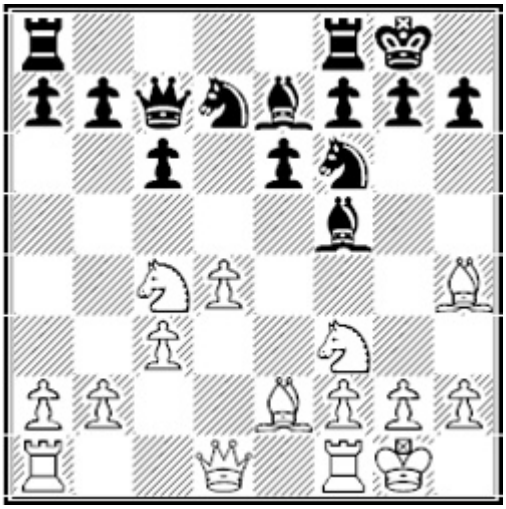
Except for the most conservative pre-moves, such as recaptures, pre-moving always involves a certain risk. The payoff for a pre-move is always certain, so the cost-benefit analysis involves comparing the time saved by the pre-move to the risk being taken and the severity of the consequences if things go wrong.

If there is a small chance of having a pre-move rebound against you, because only an unlikely move by the opponent will expose its weakness, that pre-move may well be worth making. Similarly, if the consequences are a lost tempo or perhaps a pawn, the risk may be justified, because the game will go on regardless. But if there is a serious risk of checkmate or significant material loss, pre-moving is probably too optimistic.

Our first example features several of the most basic types of pre-move blunder, where Black consistently pre-moves, without bothering to pay attention to what his opponent is doing.

This sort of instant play can be unnerving, but it’s worth remembering that no matter how fast your opponent moves, you can still win by checkmating before you run out of time.

White (1993) – Black (1939) [B01]



So far nothing much has happened in this game – on the board. But off the board, the story is different. White has taken nine seconds for his first 11 moves, while Black has blitzed them out in only three seconds, giving him a significant time advantage. Black managed this feat by pre-moving, but now he goes too far.

12.Bg3

Obvious and strong. White's g3-bishop takes control of an important diagonal and forces Black's queen back to his first rank, where it interferes with Black's rooks. At least, 12.Bg3 *should* force Black's queen back...

12...Bg6?

Another instantaneous pre-move, but a very ill-timed one. Of course Black wouldn't have pre-moved 12...Bg6? if he had anticipated an attack on his queen, but White can hardly be accused of tricking his opponent. 12.Bg3 was objectively the strongest move, so Black has only himself to blame.

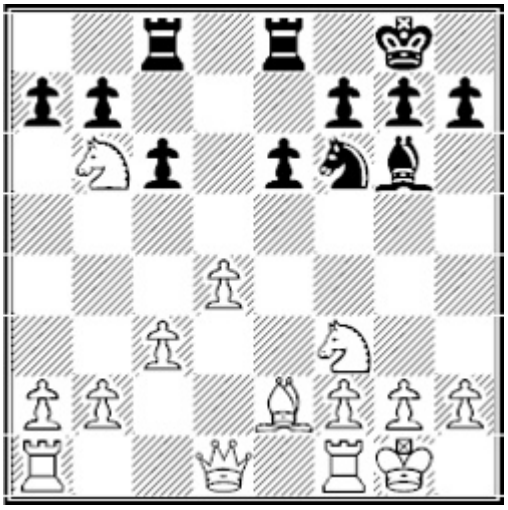
13.B×c7 Rac8 14.Bd6 Rfe8 15.B×e7 R×e7 16.Nd6 Ree8

Believe it or not, Black is still pre-moving, and has still only used three seconds for the entire game to this point! Of course, now that he is down a queen, time is his only chance. Like a gambler on a losing streak, he has to keep betting.

17.Nc4

Taking one of Black's rooks was also good.

17...Nb6 18.N×b6



18...Rcd8?

Another pre-move.

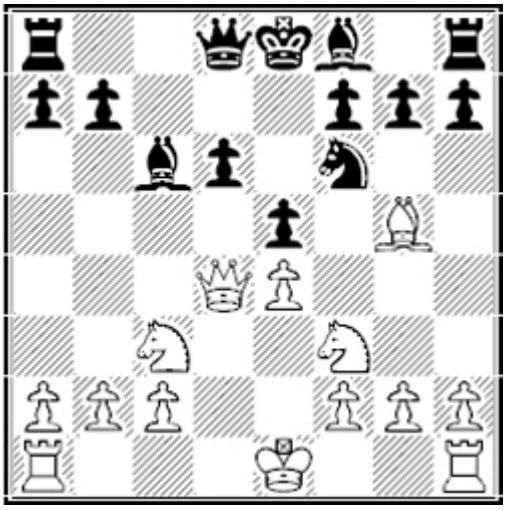
19.Nc4 1-0

At this point Black, an unrepentant sinner, resigned, still ahead on time by almost 15 seconds.

In the following game, White trusts his opponent too much and pre-moves carelessly. As a result, he gets a nasty surprise.

White (2999) – Black (2474) [B23]

1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 Nc6 3.Nf3 d6 4.Bb5 Bd7 5.B×c6 B×c6 6.d4 c×d4 7.Q×d4 Nf6 8.Bg5 e5



9.0-0-0?

White was expecting 8...e6, not the positionally suspect 8...e5, and therefore pre-moved 9.0-0-0?, which turns out to be a horrible mistake.

9...e×d4 10.N×d4

In this position no one would fault White for resigning, as there seems to be little point playing on giving queen odds! On the bright side, White has managed to lower his expectations, so to that extent the pressure is on Black.

10...Be7 11.Nf5 0-0 12.e5!

As is so often the case in bullet, it is good to attack at all costs, even when down a queen.

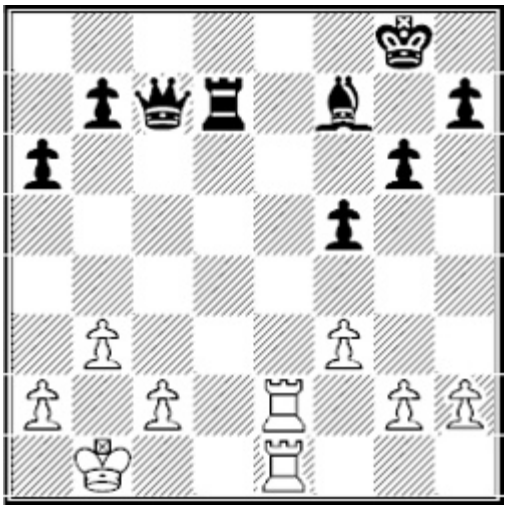
12...Nd5 13.N×e7+ N×e7 14.e×d6 f6 15.d×e7 Q×e7 16.Bf4

White has improved his chances slightly by winning back some material, and he now has a knight and a pawn for his queen. But White is still in quite a bit of trouble, partly because Black can offer to exchange rooks on both open files, and partly because a queen is worth a lot more than a knight and a pawn. White plays on.

16...Rad8 17.Rde1 Qf7 18.f3 Rfe8 19.Ref1

To have any hope, White must keep some pieces on the board, even if this means giving way to his opponent. Black must be given a chance to err.

19...a6 20.b3 Rd7 21.Kb2 Rc8 22.Rf2 Bd5 23.Re1 f5 24.Bd2 Qf6 25.Rfe2 Bf7 26.Kb1 R×c3 27.B×c3 Q×c3 28.Re3 Qc7 29.R3e2 g6

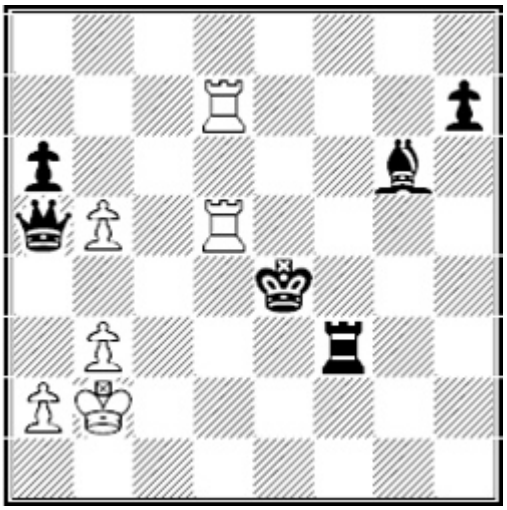


Black has used his queen effectively, increasing his material advantage, and now has very little work left to do, but anything can happen in bullet chess! Still, with White having 40 seconds left and Black having 32 seconds, a miracle seems unlikely.

30.h3 Kg7 31.g4 f×g4 32.h×g4 Qc6 33.f4 Rc7 34.f5 g×f5 35.g×f5

White's kingside pawn advance does nothing, other than possibly distract Black from finding a winning plan.

35...Kf6 36.Rh2 Kg7 37.Rg1+ Kf8 38.f6 Bg6 39.Rgg2 Kf7 40.Re2 Rd7 41.Kb2 Rd6 42.c3 R×f6 43.Rd2 Rf3 44.c4 Qf6+ 45.Ka3 Qc3 46.Rd7+ Ke6 47.Rhd2 b5 48.R2d6+ Ke5 49.Rd5+ Ke4 50.c×b5 Qa5+ 51.Kb2



Up to this point Black has maintained his calm, despite the obvious annoyance of White not resigning and being down on time (Black has 10 seconds left, as opposed to White's 19 seconds). But now Black panics and blunders horrendously.

Black was looking for checks, but found the wrong one! 51...Rf2+ would have led to checkmate in five moves.

51...Qd2+?

Here we strictly adhere to our convention of never assigning two question marks to any move made in a bullet game. It is never easy to play bullet and

mistakes should be treated charitably.

Note that White's oversight involves missing a backwards move by White's d5-rook. This theme recurs time and again.

52.R×d2

Tragically, White now simply has a winning ending. Black fights on, but he must have felt like the last of the SPECTRE thugs sent after James Bond, when all the others have failed. After all, Black had an extra queen for more than 40 moves, but now the battle continues with White having a material advantage.

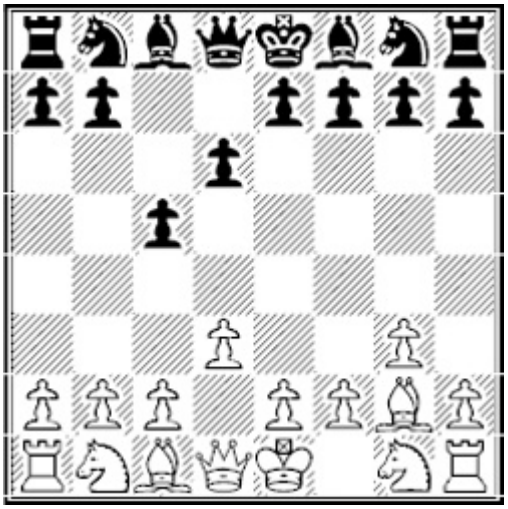
52...a×b5 53.Re7+ Kf4 54.Rd4+ Kg3 55.Rd5 Rf2+ 56.Ka3 Kg2 57.Kb4 Rb2 58.Rg5+ Kf3 59.R×b5 Kf4 60.Ra5 Rf2 61.Rb7 Kg3 62.Rbb5 1-0

White had 13 seconds left, and Black had five seconds.

In the next examples, one player tries to take advantage of his opponent's "pre-move," only to find that he guessed wrong.

White (1905) – Black (1775) [A00]

1.d3 c5 2.g3 d6 3.Bg2



3...Bh3?!

Made instantly, in the hope that White has pre-moved. Unfortunately for Black, he hadn't.

Foolish as 3...Bh3?! appears, this sort of move occurs frequently in bullet chess, and they work more often than you'd think. Players that try these tricks don't really think they will succeed all that often, but they get a big kick out of it when they do – just as their victims are infuriated at their own carelessness.

4.B×h3!?

4.N×h3 is also good.

4...Nc6 ... 1-0

Black played on, despite being a piece down for nothing. The challenge for White was to avoid the psychological trap of thinking the game was over, either because he was winning or because Black was likely to give away more material. It is not always easy to guard against these very real

psychological dangers. However, we won't bore you with the rest of the game – White mated his opponent in another 23 moves, with 27 seconds left on his clock.

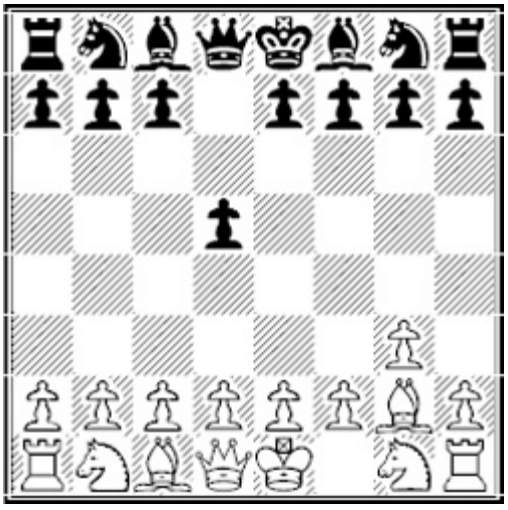
For those readers who don't want to take our word for it that this type of thing happens fairly often, here's another example, which might also shed some light on the psychology behind such suicide attacks.

White (2025) – Black (2193) [A00]

1.g3 d5 2.Bg2 ***(D)***

A perfectly safe pre-move.

2...Bh3?!



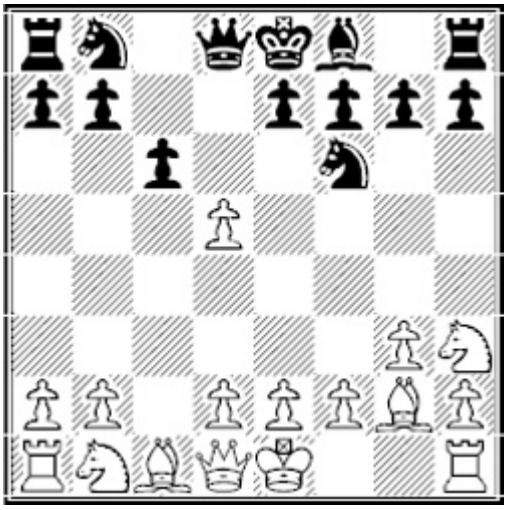
Black again tries for a quick pre-move win.

3.N×h3

White spent two seconds on this move. Black might have thought this meant White was surprised by 2...Bh3?!, but in fact White was ready for it

and was simply trying to decide whether to capture on h3 with his bishop or his knight.

3...Nf6 4.c4 c6 5.c×d5 2-0



At this point, Black disconnected and forfeited. Our view is that causing an opponent to disconnect from the chess server and stop playing altogether is worth two wins – hence the “2-0” result.

The fact that Black called it a night indicates that his suicide attack truly was an all-or-nothing effort. Black decided it just wasn’t much fun playing against an opponent who didn’t lose without a fight.

This game took nine seconds in its entirety.

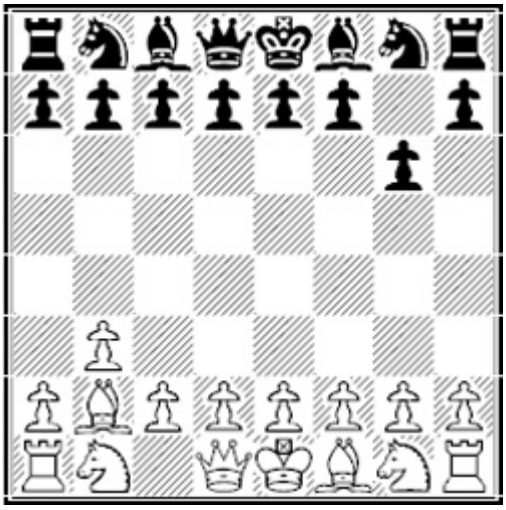
The next game puts the previous two to shame, as pre-move blunders by both players collide.

White (2099) – Black (1913) [A01]

1.b3 g6

Black pre-moves his first move, since nothing can go too badly wrong. But 1...g6 probably justifies 1.b3 more than most other moves.

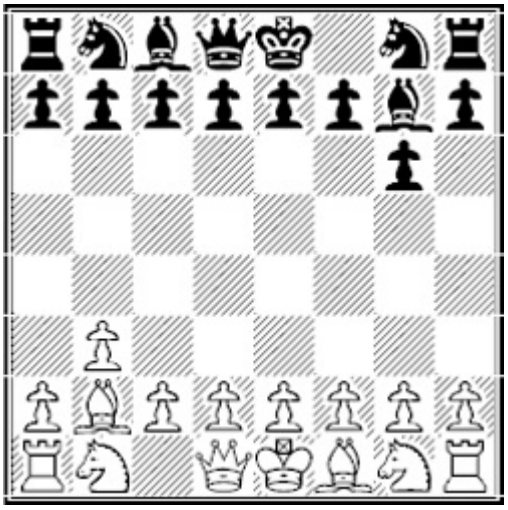
2.Bb2



White gets a bishop on the a1-h8 diagonal first, forcing either 2...Nf6 or 2...f6!?. But there is another possibility which White fails to anticipate.

2...Bg7? ***(D)***

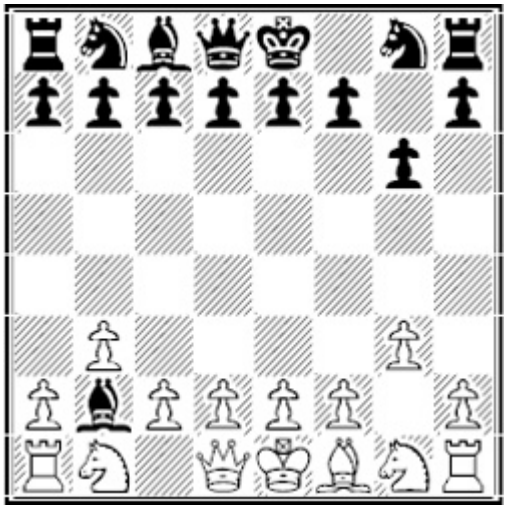
Black makes the basic mistake of pre-moving when his opponent was able to make a move (2.Bb2) which creates a threat. Sometimes the time saved on a pre-move is worth the risk of an obscure threat, but here 2.Bb2 was White's most obvious move, so this is a case of pure carelessness.



3.g3?

One good turn deserves another! White, trusting that Black would respond sensibly to 2.Bb2, pre-moves 3.g3. Unfortunately for him, this not only costs him the opportunity of winning immediately with 3.B×g7 and 4.B×h8, but also allows Black to turn the tables completely.

3...B×b2 ... 0-1



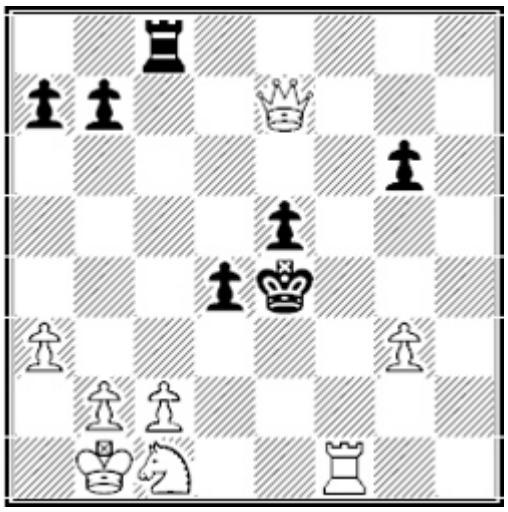
White now played 4.Nc3 B×a1 5.Q×a1 and prolonged what could well have been a five-second game for nearly 25 more moves, before being

checkmated as a result of his opponent’s massive material advantage.

One of the authors clearly recalls developing a morbid fear of fianchettoes when he was six years old as a result of exactly this sort of thing. Bullet brings out the child in us.

Moving to the middle game, we see more carelessness in the following game, where White pre-moves without realizing that his opponent has a clever rejoinder.

White (2176) – Black (2176) [A00]



After a well-played attack, White has achieved an easily winning position. With 15 seconds left, to Black’s ten seconds, what could go wrong? Let’s see.

35.Q×b7+!

A good start. White sees that he can win Black’s remaining rook. At this point, White is already bored and starting to think of the next game. With more time, a massive material advantage, his opponent’s king in a mating

net and lots of black pawn moves to eliminate stalemate possibilities, Black's continued resistance seems pointless and irritating. But in bullet you can never let yourself think this way.

After 35.Q×b7+, White contemptuously pre-moved 36.Q×c8, in order to win a little bit faster...

35...Rc6!

Of course! This might have been a smart-move, an attempt to defer the inevitable, or a very resourceful defensive try. We prefer the last explanation.

36.Qc8?

The ill-advised pre-move now costs White a whole queen for nothing, plus it lets Black keep his rook.

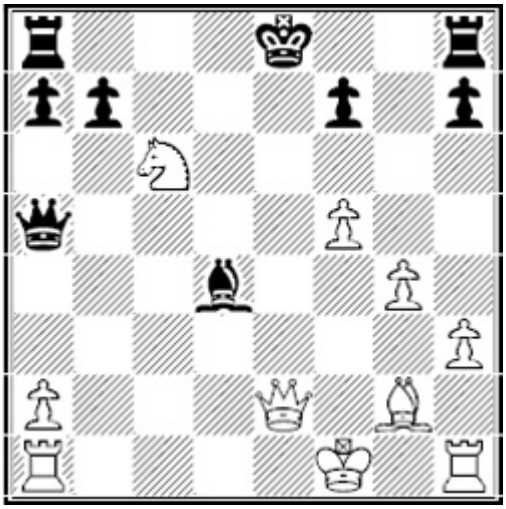
36...R×c8 37.Nd3 ... 1-0

To his credit, White successfully channeled his frustration and used his five-second lead and his (greatly reduced) material advantage to run Black out of time in another 20 moves, winning with two seconds left.

Here is another, more sophisticated example of a pre-move near disaster.

White (1917) – Black (1922) [A00]

1.g3 c5 2.Bg2 e6 3.d3 Nf6 4.Nc3 d5 5.e4 Nc6 6.Bg5 d4 7.Nce2 Be7 8.B×f6 g×f6 9.f4 f5 10.e×f5 e5 11.f×e5 N×e5 12.h3 Bg5 13.g4 Be3 14.Nf3 Qc7 15.c3 d×c3 16.b×c3 Bd7 17.d4 c×d4 18.c×d4 Qa5+ 19.Kf1 Bb5 20.N×e5 B×e2+ 21.Q×e2 B×d4 22.Nc6+



After a somewhat irregular but exciting opening, White has just played 22.Nc6+, winning Black's a5-queen. Rather than resign, Black tries one last trick.

22...Qe5! 23.N×e5! 1-0

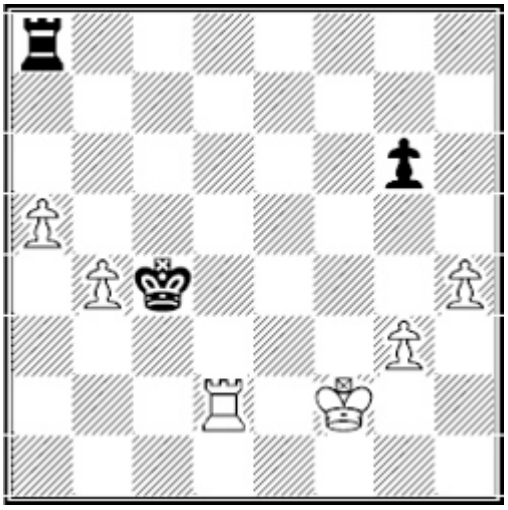
Why the exclamation marks for these obvious moves?

Black's idea, which very nearly worked, was 22...Qe5! 23.Na5? (pre-moved) 23...B×a1, with a decisive advantage. White had in fact pre-moved 23.Na5?, so Black's idea almost worked, but at the last moment White cancelled his pre-move and played 23.N×e5!

23.N×e5? (pre-move) would also be a mistake, because Black might not play 22...Qe5.

While the previous games serve more as reminders to the reader of the dangers of pre-moves, the following example shows just how much there is to think about in bullet.

White (2506) – Black (2992) [B23]



After a very tense game, with some mutual errors, White has 11 seconds left, while Black has 13 seconds. On the board, White has a decisive advantage, although many moves remain to be played, which means time is likely to be an increasingly important factor.

From a logical standpoint, Black seems to have only two moves which make any sense. The first is 63...Rf8+, throwing in a check in order to surprise White into losing some time. The second is the more obvious 63...K×b4, which threatens to capture White's a5-pawn. But this is bullet, and there are other considerations, especially pre-moves.

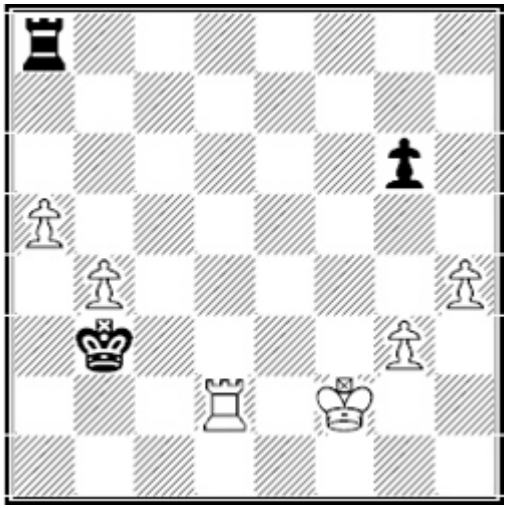
White should be expecting 63...K×b4, which is Black's most natural move. White has two reasonable replies to 63...K×b4: 64.Rd5 and 64.Ra2. Of these two moves, 64.Ra2 is more natural, as then White can just push his a-pawn until Black stops it. Whether Black captures White's a-pawn or not, White's king will attack Black's g6-pawn and the ensuing play will be simple. If Black captures White's a-pawn, this will result in an exchange of rooks, which makes things even easier for White. If he doesn't, Black's rook will be tied down and White won't have to worry about counterplay.

Given the time left to each player (11 seconds for White; 13 seconds for Black), time is crucial and therefore both sides are looking to pre-move.

Putting two and two together, Black concludes (mostly by instinct) that White is likely to pre-move (because 63...K×b4 is the obvious move) and that 64.Ra2 is the most likely candidate move (because rooks belong behind passed pawns and because White's a5-pawn would be in need of protection after Black captures White's b4-pawn).

Black therefore plays to exploit this possibility.

63...Kb3!



64.Ra2?

Black guessed correctly! White does indeed pre-move 64.Ra2?, and as a result Black winds up being the only one with a rook in this rook and pawn ending. This shows why anticipation is so important when the game comes down to a mad scramble.

64...K×a2 65.h5 g×h5 ... 0-1

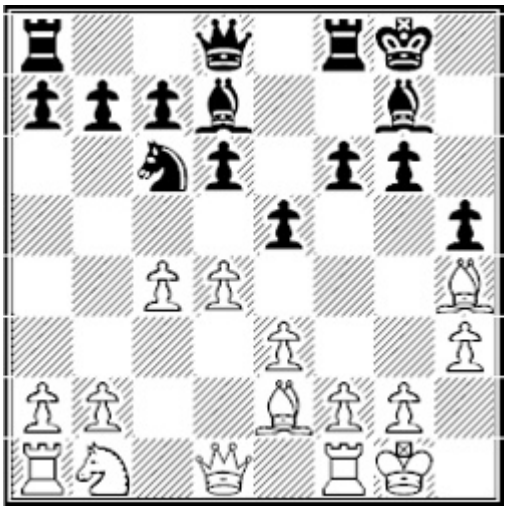
Black went on to win the king and rook vs. king ending 11 moves later.

We now shift from looking at taking advantage of the opponent's pre-moves (or trying to), to examining pre-moves which prevent the exploitation of an opponent's mistake.

Generally, the consequences of this type of pre-move mistake are not as severe, and often are barely noticeable, but in certain situations they can be costly.

White (2002) – Black (1916) [A40]

1.d4 g6 2.Nf3 Bg7 3.Bf4 d6 4.e3 Nc6 5.Be2 Bd7 6.0-0 e5 7.Bg5 f6 8.Bh4 Nh6 9.c4 Nf5 10.Bg3 h5 11.Nh4 N×h4 12.B×h4 0-0 13.h3



In this position, Black would very much like to activate his kingside pawns with 13...f5, increasing the pressure on White's d4-pawn and also threatening to bury White's h4-bishop under an avalanche of black pawns. The only problem is that White's h4-bishop pins Black's f6-pawn, so 13...f5? will be met by 14.B×d8. Or will it?

13...f5? 14.Bg3?

With 42 seconds left, White was apparently so ready for 13...g5 that he either pre-moved 14.Bg3 or just reacted to Black's 13...f5? as though it was 13...g5. Now Black reaps all of the advantages of 13...f5 without any of the disadvantages (and there was really only one drawback to 13...f5? – the immediate loss of Black's queen).

14...f4 15.e×f4 e×f4 16.Bh2 N×d4 17.Nc3 Qg5! 18.Bf3 B×h3 19.Kh1 B×g2+!

Having gotten away with 13...f5?, Black digs deep and makes some good moves.

20.B×g2 f3 21.Bh3 Qh4 22.Bd7?

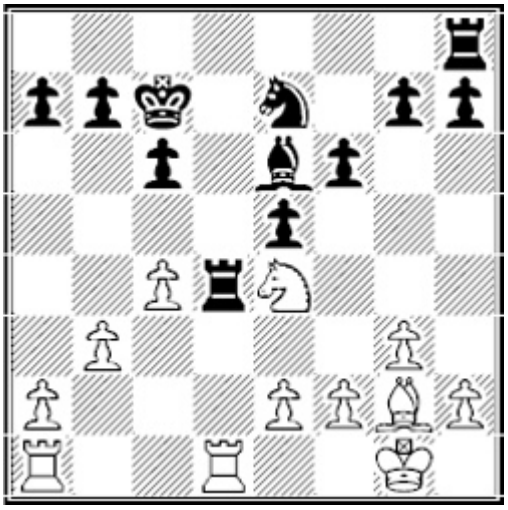
White has 27 seconds left, but fails to find 22.Rg1, although even if White had found this resource, Black would still be winning.

22...Be5 0-1

In the next examples, the culprit is the pre-move's poor cousin, the smart-move. Smart-moves are even more likely to blow up in your face than pre-moves.

In this completely balanced position where neither player has used more than ten seconds, White makes a one-move threat.

White (2488) – Black (2569) [A41]



16.Nc5!? e4?

This horrendous move seems inexplicable, but in fact it's not. Black anticipated 17.R×d4, and had clicked on his e5-pawn using smart-move. The recapture 17...e×d4 would then be automatic, but Black's time-saving strategy backfired.

After 16.Nc5!?, Black's e5-pawn followed orders and made the only legal move it could: 16...e4 (the smart-move 16...e×d4 was impossible, because White hadn't captured Black's d4-rook). This left Black's e6-bishop hanging and Black's d4-rook unprotected, turning a blunder into a catastrophe of Biblical proportions.

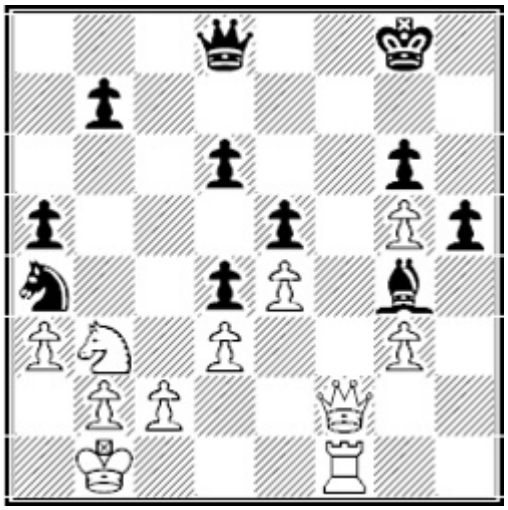
It need not have happened. Had Black pre-moved 16...e×d4, he would have saved just as much time had White played 16.R×d4, but would also have been safe after 16.Nc5!?.

It goes without saying that if White anticipated all this, he's a genius.

17.N×e6+ 1-0

The next smart-move blunder just speeds things up.

White (2145) – Black (2107) [B24]



After being on top for most of the game, Black has frittered away his advantage and finds himself facing destruction down the f-file. His only hope is time, but White has 23 seconds left, against Black's 26 seconds, so it's a faint hope. 32.Qf7+ Kh8 33.Q×g6 is now decisive, but White crosses up his opponent by playing a weaker move.

32.Qf6!? Kh7

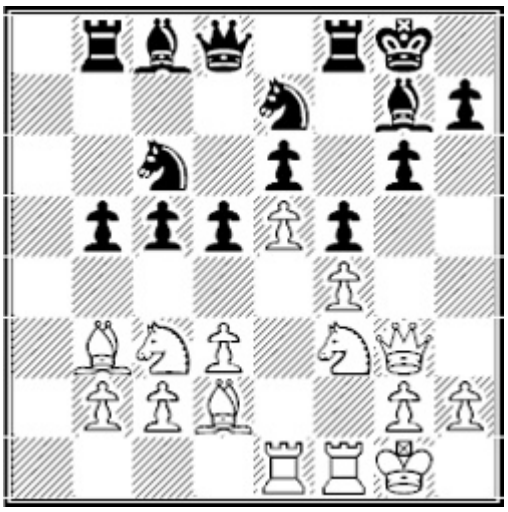
While this move loses instantly, a question mark is not justified. Black must have triggered a smart-move by his king, expecting 32.Qf7+ Kh8 (32...Kh7 as a pre-move would be illegal after 32.Qf7+). Because White played a different queen move, Black's king automatically went to the only legal square available.

Since 32.Qf7+ won, and Black would also lose after 32.Qf6 Q×f6 33.R×f6, it isn't quite fair to call 32...Kh7 a "blunder," but it illustrates the risks of smart-moving.

33.Q×d8 1-0

Some mysteries remain, as in the following two games.

White (1943) – Black (2106) [B06]



Black is happy with his opening, as his pawn phalanx gives him a positional advantage. With time not yet a factor, Black advances where he is strongest.

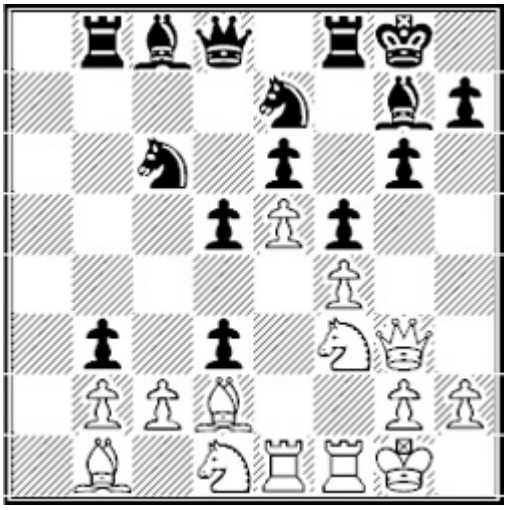
15...c4 16.Ba2 b4 17.Nd1?!

17.Ne2 was better, although Black would still have an edge.

17...b3

The materialistic 17...Qa5 18.Bb1 Qa1, followed by 19...Q×b2, was even better, but Black is playing purely by positional instinct, and attacks the base of White's c2-d3 pawn chain.

18.Bb1 c×d3?!



19.Ba2?

One way this move can be explained is that it is a not-so-smart smart move. After 18...b×c2 (which was objectively stronger than 18...c×d3?!, as played), the "smart-move" with White's b1-bishop is 19.B×c2. But after 18...c×d3?!, 19.Ba2? is the "smartest move," because it's the only move.

Another explanation is that White expected 18...b×c2 and pre-moved 19.Ba2, but this doesn't make sense, because 19.B×c2 is the only sensible reply to 18...b×c2.

It's always possible that 19.Ba2 was just an inexplicable mistake, resulting from "operator error."

19...b×a2 20.c×d3

A pre-move, or has White just lost it?

20...a1Q

This is very discouraging development for White.

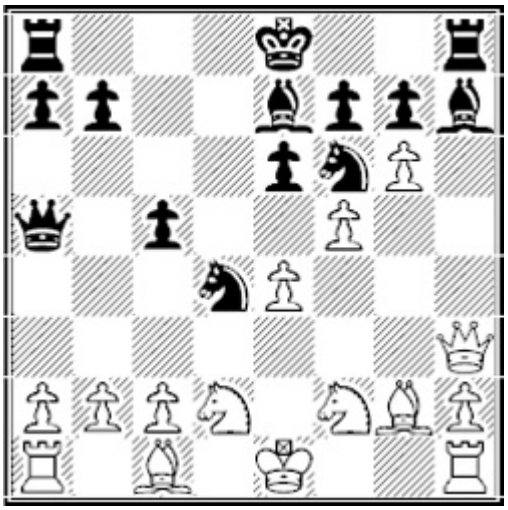
21.Ne3 Q×b2

Black keeps his new queen.

22.Ng4 0-1

In our last example, Black is losing, but the way in which he loses is hard to fathom.

White (2394) – Black (2184) [A00]



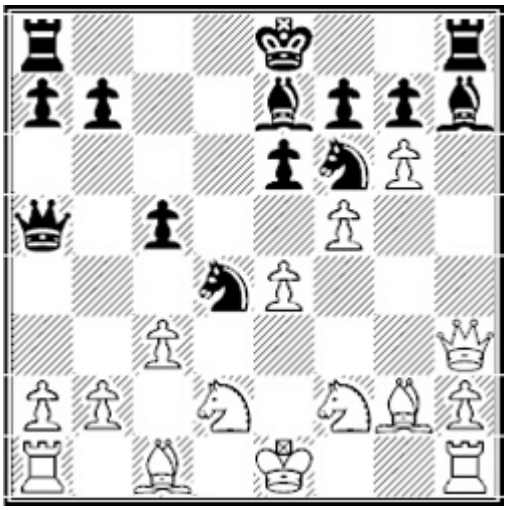
After what was obviously a very unusual opening, White has achieved a winning position. He is a pawn up but, more importantly, he is about to win Black's unfortunate h7-bishop.

With time about equal (both players have around 40 seconds left), Black's only chance is to stir up trouble on the queenside, and to that end he has just played 16...Nd4, threatening 17...N×c2+ and 18...N×a1.

White should put his king to work and calmly defend with 17.Kd1, but instead he plays an unexpectedly weak move, which is met by an even

weaker response.

17.c3?



17...Q×c3?

It is actually hard to figure out the genesis of this mistake. Our best guess is that Black anticipated 17.Qc3, and pre-moved 17...Q×c3? Alternatively, when Black saw that something had moved to c3, he may have assumed it was White's queen. Finally, it's also possible that Black was disgusted with his position and decided to resign in this manner.

18.b×c3

Maintaining the pin on Black's h7-bishop.

18...Nc2+ 19.Kd1 N×a1 20.g×h7 1-0

Pre-moves are a part of bullet, but players who play with fire can sometimes get burned...

Chapter 6

Choosing Your Openings

There are many chess openings and even more books telling chess players which openings to play. The last thing the world needs is another book on this topic, so we will keep this chapter mercifully short.

In deciding what openings to play in bullet chess, as opposed to normal chess, there are several factors to consider.

Why are you playing?

Perhaps the most important question to answer is why you are playing bullet at all. The three most common, and not mutually exclusive, answers are: 1) for fun; 2) to win; and 3) to practice.

If you are only playing bullet for fun, then almost any opening will do. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, the definition of an “opening” in bullet chess is so broad as to be almost meaningless – almost any opening moves are playable, whether they are recognized, much less approved, by chess theory or not. We won’t dwell on this particular issue, because we will assume that bullet is always fun, and enjoyment is a neutral factor in choosing your openings.

If winning is important – and bullet, like most games, is more fun when you win – then you will want your bullet openings to suit your style and strengths. If you are a tactical player, you will want to play aggressive openings; if you are a positional player, you will want to play sounder,

quieter openings; and so on. We will discuss this subject at greater length a little bit later.

If, on the other hand, your main goal is to become more familiar with your openings, and perhaps to experiment with new variations, you will want to play exactly what you would play in your next tournament game.

Play what you know

To restate the obvious, in bullet you have to play fast, and for almost all players this means playing openings they know. For example, if your main defense against 1.e4 is the Sicilian Defense, in bullet you should stick with 1.e4 c5. There's no reason not to, because you will be able to play at least the first few moves quickly, and will get the type of position you presumably like (otherwise you wouldn't be playing the Sicilian Defense, would you?).

Of course, a lot happens after 1.e4 c5. Many, but not all, White players will continue with 2.Nf3, to play an open Sicilian. Again, unless you have decided to switch opening variations, we suggest that if you normally play the Dragon Variation, you play it in bullet too. You could certainly fake a Najdorf or some other type of Sicilian, but it's hard to see how this could lead to anything good in bullet. The chances are pretty good that your opponent would know more theory than you, so you would either get in trouble on the board by playing a poor line, or get in trouble on the clock by having to figure out theory. Neither prospect is an inviting one.

In bullet chess, therefore, your starting point for openings is your existing repertoire, with all its holes and flaws. Play what you know, but in bullet you may be able to do better.

Main lines

A constant theme in bullet is the value of the initiative and surprise, whether tactical or strategic. The importance of the initiative is just as great in the openings as later in the game, and when considering your “bullet repertoire” you want to keep this in mind.

Every opening repertoire book discusses the advantages and disadvantages of playing “main lines.” Chess has elements of poker in it, in that you can bluff your opponent into thinking you know more than you do, but it also has elements of “rock, paper, scissors” when it comes to main lines.

Main lines, by which we mean the most commonly trod theoretical pathways, are main lines for a reason. They represent the theoretically strongest moves for each side. According to chess theory, after a certain number of moves main lines eventually result in either a clearly drawn position, or a position which is not yet fully resolved (but a year or two later, that main line might extend even farther, in which case the “truth” might be known).

Are main lines good in bullet? Sure, as long as your opponent doesn’t know them better than you do, or at least thinks he doesn’t! That’s where bluffing comes in. If you confidently unleash the first eight or ten moves of a main line, your opponent may bail out into an inferior sideline, and you will have accomplished your opening goal. The “rock, paper, scissors” paradigm is relevant because if you know your opponent knows a main line, you will avoid it, but if you know he’s bluffing, you will play it.

Against a random opponent, you’re leaving a lot to chance if you stick to main lines. After all, you might be playing some fanatic who studies

openings all the time. Against that type of player, you want to get into a sideline. But you might also be playing someone normal (well, not too normal, since we are talking about bullet), who might think *you're* a fanatic who studies openings all the time, in which case it's the opponent who may bail out into something else.

The biggest drawback to playing main lines, apart from the fact that you may not know them that well, is that, by definition, they don't contain any surprises (other than, perhaps, the surprise that you know them). This is true in both bullet and normal chess. The big difference in bullet, though, is that "correct" play has a much more expansive definition because mistakes in bullet are almost inevitable. There's not much point in agonizing about making theoretically perfect moves in the opening when you know that the sequel will be a series of second-best moves, if not outright blunders.

What this means is that in bullet "main lines" have little meaning, because it's unlikely that either player will remember a great deal of theory or be able to figure out how best to play against a sideline. Old theory may well escape refutation, and new theory can be improvised on the spot. Even "knowing" the right move often doesn't matter in bullet because of the speed at which the game is played. This gives bullet players wide latitude for creativity.

Spicing it up

This raises the question of how this latitude can best be used. Keeping in mind that the goal in the opening isn't to win outright (although it's nice to have that possibility), but rather to gain an advantage on the board or on the clock, it's often best to play sharp, semi-sound sidelines. By "semi-sound" we mean that precise play by your opponent will either neutralize your

attempt to gain an advantage or even give you an inferior, but still playable, position. And in bullet, a lot of positions are playable!

Precisely what variations you should employ to spice up your opening repertoire depends entirely on your starting point. There are always sidelines that will throw your opponents off. Just how far you want to go is entirely up to you and how much risk you are willing to take. In the Caro Kann, for example, 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 d×e4 4.N×e4 Bf5 5.Nc5!? is hardly radical or shocking, but it will probably cause most Black players to hesitate for a moment or two without any real risk to White. Another sideline, 5.Ng3 Bg6 6.Bc4!?, followed by 7.Nge2, is also likely to lead to more in bullet than in normal chess. Neither variation involves much risk to White, but by taking Black out of the more common lines, White will usually end up with a slight time advantage, and maybe more.

There are similar types of lines in almost every opening. Often such variations are just out of fashion, or have been found wanting at the highest levels, but not at the level at which bullet is normally played. Sharp variations which are slightly off the beaten track are very effective in bullet.

Preparation

The subject of openings in bullet would not be complete without a word about preparation. In one sense the whole idea seems silly because if you are being paired by computer you don’t know who your next opponent will be, and in any case you almost always will be playing someone using an anonymous handle. So much for using MegaBase to find your opponent’s latest attempts against the English Opening!

However, it is very common for bullet players to employ the same opening variations every time. Often players won't even notice they are playing the same opponent, and will repeat even bad lines move-for-move. Since the pool of available opponents at any given time is relatively small, you are likely to encounter the same opponent more than once in the same session. So "preparation" consists mainly of noticing that you are about to play a rematch and remembering what happened in the previous game(s).

Of course you can do a bit better than that if you pause after a game in which something went wrong in the opening and try to figure out where you went astray. Not only might you learn something, but you can be sure that your opponent will repeat the opening in a subsequent encounter. You can then unleash your improvement and enjoy the satisfaction of a few minutes hard work being rewarded. Marshall waited years to play his gambit against Capablanca, but in bullet things happen much more quickly!

Learning through bullet?

A recurring theme throughout this book is the resemblance between bullet and normal chess. At times the resemblance can be strong, and a good bullet game can be almost indistinguishable from a normal game. At other times, though, it is very clear that bullet is quite a different animal.

Chess curmudgeons say that bullet leads to superficial play. Of course, these same killjoys are against bug, crazyhouse, s-chess and even blitz chess. Still, when it comes to openings, the grumps may have a point. Bullet games can be a useful way to become familiar with the *types* of positions which arise out of the opening, but more careful examination is obviously required when it comes to specific variations. Quite apart from tactics,

bullet can help develop your intuition and “feel” for positions, but it has its limits!

With this in mind, in the next chapter we look at how dynamic, tricky play can lead to quick wins in bullet, before turning to the fascinating, and perhaps slightly disorienting, topic of “bullet openings.”

Chapter 7

Winning in the Opening

The best-selling book in chess history (as yet unwritten) is likely to be called “Winning Really Fast!” Chess players have always had an insatiable appetite for the quick fix, as winning in the opening is much less work than actually playing a game, which requires a dangerous amount of thinking.

In bullet, the chances of scoring a quick knockout are greater than in normal chess because it is more likely that your opponent will overlook unexpected threats. In other words, trappy opening play is more likely to succeed in bullet than in normal chess. This doesn’t resolve the real question, though, which is whether it is a good idea to play for traps in the opening.

The cold-blooded way of answering this question is that if the opponent falls for a trap, it was a good idea to set it! Unfortunately, without a fully functional crystal ball, it’s impossible to know this in advance, so we have to look for other answers.

A more helpful answer is that traps, in the opening and elsewhere, are worth setting if the rewards outweigh the risks. As with pre-moves and other risky behavior, the risk must be assessed by looking at both the chances of success and the consequences of failure. A move which sets a trap that has a small chance of working, but which is otherwise good, or even playable, is usually worth playing. An “all-or-nothing” move, like some of the kamikaze pre-moves looked at earlier, would only be justified on psychological grounds, if for some reason the chance the move would work was great, as otherwise it would ruin your position.

Bullet is full of psychology, as was normal chess before the advent of computers. We shall devote an entire chapter to this subject, but it certainly has an impact on opening choices and the merits of trappy play. The psychology of both the potential victim (will your opponent fall for it?) and the player setting the trap (are you a gambler?) factor into the equation. It's hard for us, from a distance, to say much more about this aspect of the issue, other than to recommend opening variations that contain Lasker's "drop of poison" wherever possible. In bullet, "cheap threats" are perfectly acceptable, but each player must decide whether they are ready to play out the position which will arise if an alert opponent sees through the threat.

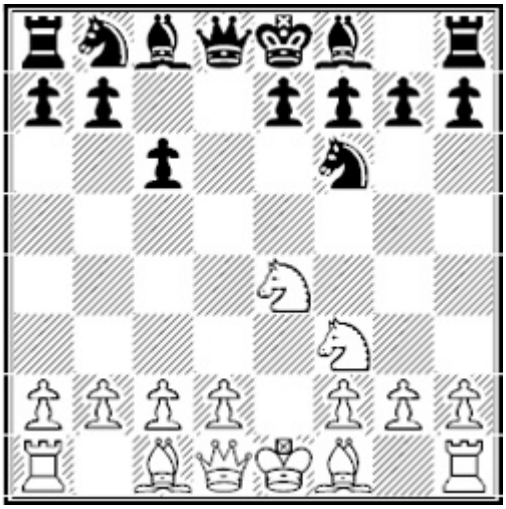
What makes the openings special is that traps can be prepared in advance. As discussed in the previous chapter, there are many factors to consider when putting together an opening repertoire, but in general it's safe to say that a move order or variation which contains the possibility of a quick win is often worth playing.

Since we are discussing bullet chess, the time factor must be mentioned as well. From the point of view of what happens on the board, whether a trap succeeds or not is clear. For example, either you trap the opponent's queen or not. But it may well be that the opponent spots the trap, but takes four or five seconds to avoid it and find the right answer. One then can't really say that the trap has failed. Gaining a lead on the clock is as real as winning material or gaining some other advantage on the board An unsuccessful trap or threat may also cause the opponent to start to see ghosts and play more slowly, because he is worrying about non-existent threats, or threats which you don't even notice. Trappy play may therefore have benefits which are not easily quantified.

In this chapter we will confine ourselves to successful opening traps which illustrate the principles we have been discussing. The chapter itself is one of the shorter ones in this book, because the games, for some reason, are not that long!

White (2943) - Black (2451) [B11]

1.e4 c6 2.Nc3 d5 3.Nf3 d×e4 4.N×e4 Nf6

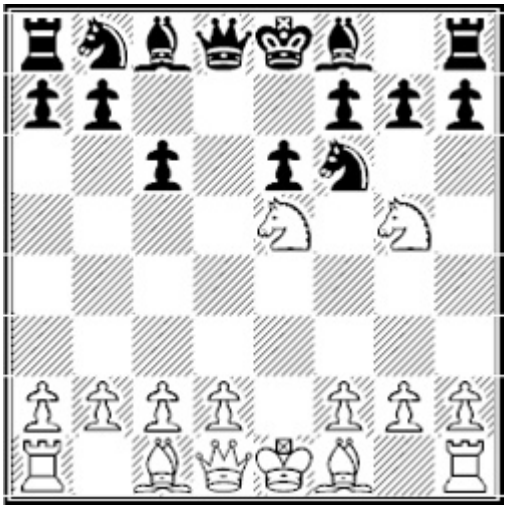


5.Neg5!? e6?

The obvious 5...h6! was much better, after which White has to retreat his g5-knight, leaving Black with a definite advantage. Does this mean White's last move was a mistake? No, because if Black has to use three or four seconds to find 5...h6! this is a fair trade, as the resulting position is not outright losing for White.

Of course, there is always the possibility that Black might not play 5...h6!...

6.Ne5! 1-0

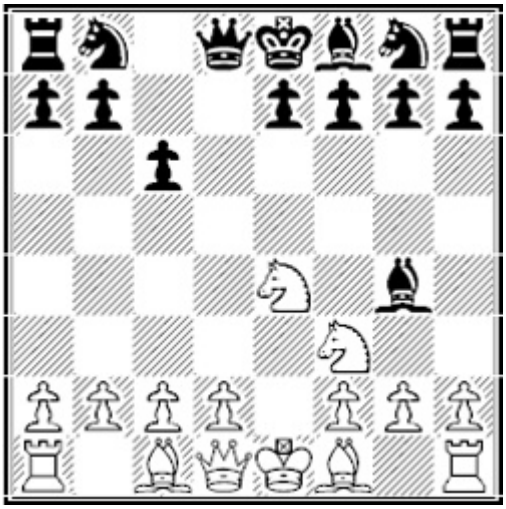


Suddenly disaster strikes on f7. Rather than prolong the knightmare, Black resigned, which is one of the pluses to bullet. You can always just play another game.

Coincidentally, the next example also arises out of the Caro Kann. We don’t intend to disparage this fine defense, which both authors have played and which should let Black last more than ten moves. At the very least it has one of the coolest names of any chess opening.

White (2951) – Black (2391) [B11]

1.e4 c6 2.Nc3 d5 3.Nf3 d×e4 4.N×e4 Bg4?!



5.Neg5!?

Normally 4...Bg4?! is avoided because of such unpleasant variations. 5.h3!? is also good.

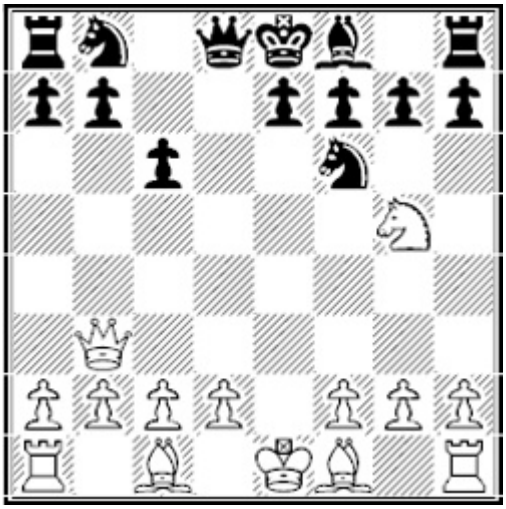
5...B×f3?!

A dubious move. 5...Nf6 works because 6.N×f7 drops a piece to 6...B×f3! However, in bullet positions of this sort can get very tricky if one does not know them well.

6.Q×f3! Nf6?

Falling for White’s trap. 6...Qd5! would have left Black with only a slight disadvantage.

7.Qb3!



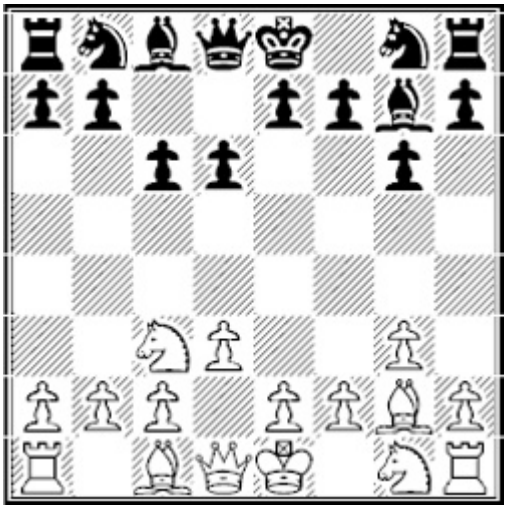
Just like that, Black's position collapses.

7...Qd5?! 8.Q×b7 c5 9.Bb5+ Nbd7 10.B×d7+ Kd8 11.Q×d5 1-0

In the next few examples, we see how early aggression can pay off in the opening. It's a bit misleading to describe such play as "trappy," as the intentions of the attacker are hardly concealed. It's more accurate to characterize this type of play as an application of the more general principle that in bullet the initiative is even more important than in normal chess.

White (2147) – Black (2228) [A00]

1.g3 d6 2.Bg2 c6 3.d3 g6 4.Nc3 Bg7

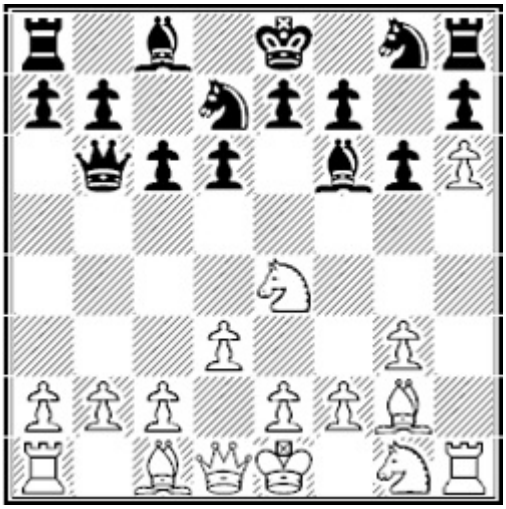


5.h4!?

This type of sudden attack often works well in bullet, as the opponent may have already committed to his next move, both psychologically and with his mouse. Objectively, Black would be fine after 5...Nf6, but Black instead allows the further advance of White's h4-pawn. Black might have feared 5...Nf6 6.h5?! N×h5 7.R×h5?!, but he shouldn't have.

In any case, Black ignores White's last move, and continues to play instantaneously, having taken less than a second for his first five moves.

5...Qb6!? 6.h5!? Nd7 7.h6 Bf6 8.Ne4



This is White’s opening idea – to get rid of Black’s dark-squared bishop and then somehow exploit the resulting weaknesses in Black’s position.

Objectively, Black has little reason to fear this plan, although from White’s point of view it’s a plan that lets him find moves relatively quickly. But now White gets a bonus, because Black overreacts, thinking that White has blundered.

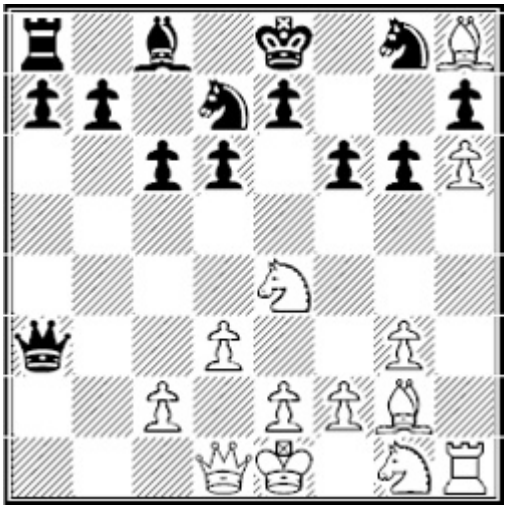
8...B×b2?

Black thought for three seconds on this move, but it’s bad. The next few moves are forced.

9.Rb1! Qa5+ 10.Bd2 Q×a2 11.R×b2!

Black missed this move, which initiates a small combination.

11...Q×b2 12.Bc3 Qa3 13.B×h8 f6



With two pawns for a piece, Black is not that far behind in material, but White's position is much easier to play. Black has a two-second lead in time at this point, but White still has 47 seconds left, so time isn't yet an issue.

14.Bg7 d5 15.Nd2 Kf7 16.Ngf3 e5 17.g4!?

White plays to undermine Black's pawn wall and succeeds in spectacular fashion.

17...Ne7?! 18.g5 Nf5 19.g×f6 Qd6 20.Ng5+ Kg8 21.f7 mate 1-0

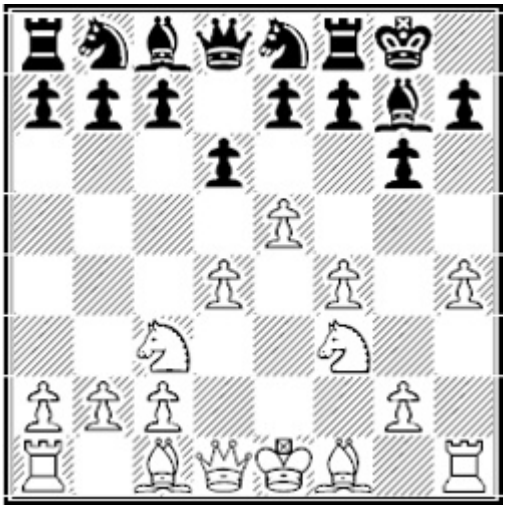
The next example features another quick attack with h2-h4-h5 against a kingside fianchetto. Such attacks are hardly fatal, but they can be if the defender doesn't react properly.

White (2918) – Black (2297) [B06]

1.e4 g6 2.Nc3 Bg7 3.d4 d6 4.f4 Nf6 5.Nf3 0-0 6.e5 Ne8?!

A bit passive. 6...Nfd7 is normal. White attacks.

7.h4



7...c6?

A blunder or a mouse slip? 7...Bg4!? is better, but the natural move is 7...c5, in order to create counterplay in the center while White goes for broke on the kingside.

8.h5 d×e5 9.f×e5 f6?

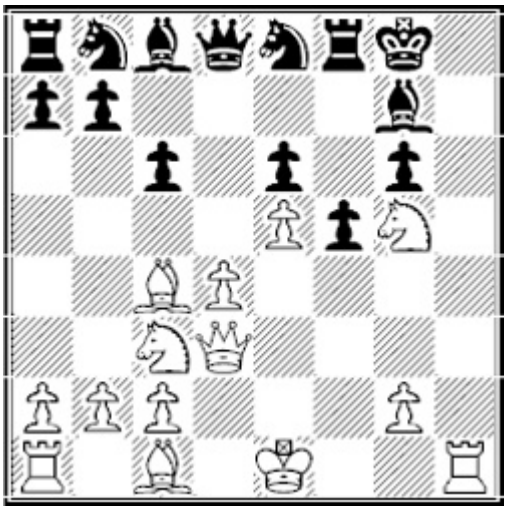
An extremely ugly move which completely ruins Black's kingside. However, Black played this move very calmly, using less than a second. Perhaps beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but more likely Black was already starting to worry about his king.

10.h×g6 h×g6 11.Bc4+ e6 12.Qd3! f5 13.Ng5 ***(D)***

13...Rf7?

Up to this point, Black has only used seven seconds, while White has used six seconds, but here Black spends an amazing 20 seconds on his move. It's hard to find anything better because there isn't anything better, but giving

White a near-decisive lead in time puts Black's position past the point of no return.



The question mark is therefore for the time Black spent on 13...Rf7?, not for the move itself.

14.N×e6!

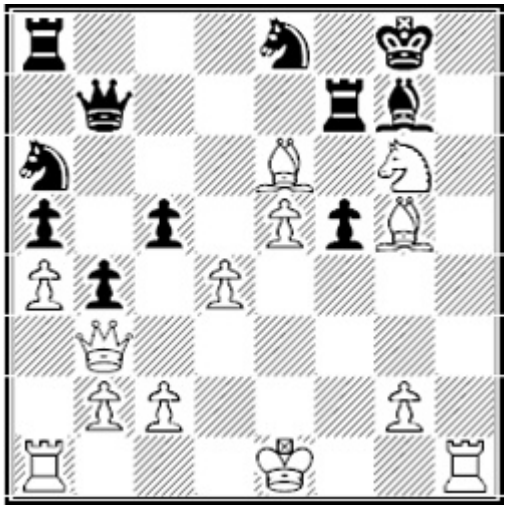
Better than the more obvious 14.N×f7, which is also winning. Apart from being objectively superior, 14.N×e6! keeps plenty of tactical threats alive, which is preferable to resolving the position, since Black is short of time.

14...B×e6 15.B×e6 Qe7 16.Qc4 b5 17.Qb3 a5 18.Bg5! Qc7 19.a4 b4 20.Ne2 Na6 21.Nf4 c5 22.Nd5

22.Qh3! mates, but sideways moves are often hard to see.

22...Qb7 23.Ne7+ Kf8 24.N×g6+ Kg8 ***(D)***

25.Be7



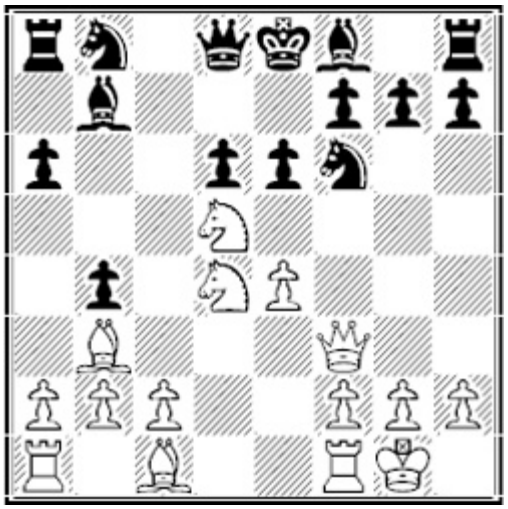
Prettier than 25.Qh3.

25...c×d4 26.B×f7 mate 1-0

The initiative may come at a price, but that price is very often worth paying.

White (3008) – Black (2577) [B87]

1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 d6 3.Nf3 a6 4.d4 c×d4 5.N×d4 e6 6.Bc4 b5 7.Bb3 Nf6 8.Qf3 Bb7 9.0-0 b4 10.Nd5!



The most aggressive try. 10.Nd5! leads to a complicated position which is objectively about equal. However, in bullet such sacrifices tend to be significantly stronger than in normal chess, because they result in unclear positions in which it is difficult to find an obvious defensive plan.

10...e×d5 11.e×d5 Be7 12.Re1 0-0 13.Nf5 Re8 14.Bg5 Nbd7 15.Qg3

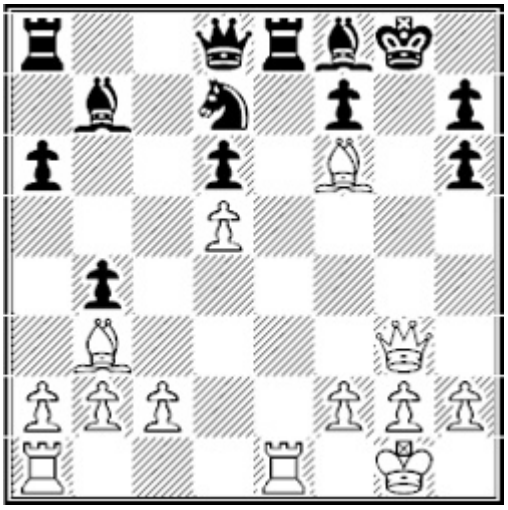
At this point, White has 51 seconds remaining, while Black has 49 seconds. Here Black uses four seconds trying to find the right defense. He fails.

Black would have been better off taking more time, as getting mated didn't help his cause. If he loses on time later on, that's too bad, but losing later is always better than losing right away, because while there's life, there's hope.

15...Bf8?

Both 15...g6 and 15...Ne5 were approximately equal, but Black didn't take enough time to either see that 15...Bf8? lost or to find the right defense(s). Now White's sacrifice pays off.

16.Nh6+! g×h6 17.B×f6+ 1-0



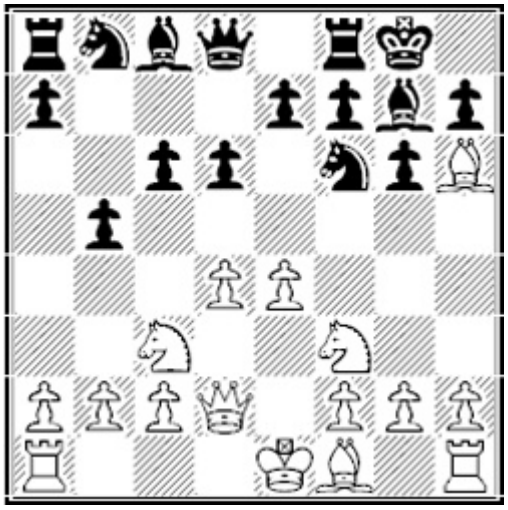
It’s mate, and time no longer matters.

Just to avoid leaving a misleading impression, our final example demonstrates that aggression doesn’t always pay off automatically, as an early attack can open a player up to a devastating counterattack.

Curiously, our example features yet another h2-h4 attack against a kingside fianchetto, but this time Black reacts alertly and the attack blows out in dramatic fashion.

White (2525) – Black (3019) [B08]

1.d4 d6 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.e4 Bg7 5.Be3 0-0 6.Qd2 c6 7.Bh6 b5



8.h4?

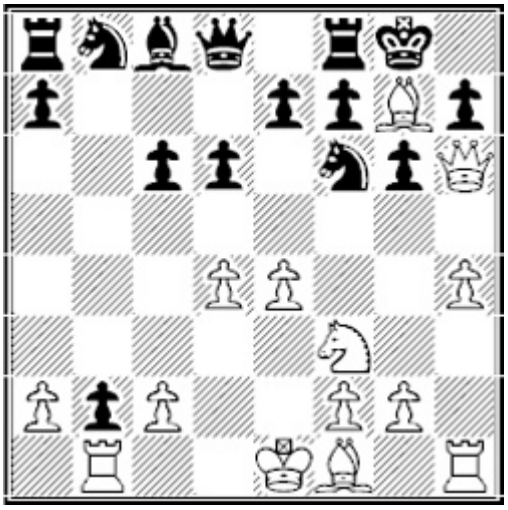
White begins a kingside attack, applying the bullet principle that attacking is always the best choice. But things are not always that simple.

The problem is that 8.h4? starts an attack, but by Black! 8.B×g7 K×g7 9.Bd3 would have been roughly equal, but in bullet many players have little interest in playing such seemingly dull positions, although somehow they often have a way of getting interesting.

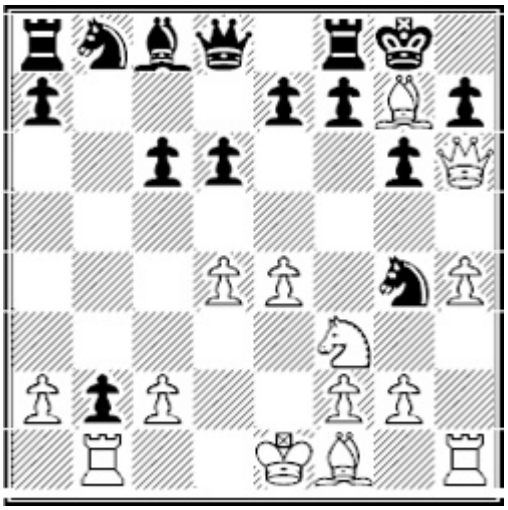
8...b4! 9.B×g7 b×c3! 10.Qh6

This is not nearly as dangerous as it looks.

10...c×b2 11.Rb1



11...Ng4



11...Qa5+ was also good.

12.B×f8 N×h6 13.B×h6 Qa5+ 14.Bd2

14.Nd2 was better, but it wouldn’t bring back White’s queen.

14...Q×a2 0-1

White resigned, as massive material losses are unavoidable.

As can be seen from these examples, and there could have been many more, bullet games can often be won in the opening, before time can really be said to be the determining factor. Of course, in bullet time is *always* a factor to some extent, because when players are not actually short of time, they are usually playing quickly in order to either avoid getting short of time or to cause their opponents to have time troubles.

Either way, sharp opening traps and unexpected threats early in the game can pay big dividends in bullet. Unfamiliar and unexpected play can catch players unawares. In the next chapter, we examine the results when this approach is taken to extremes.

Chapter 8

Bullet Openings

In the previous chapter we discussed the ways one might approach the opening in bullet so as to cause the opponent as much trouble as possible. It is clear that bullet is more forgiving than normal chess as far as the openings (and a lot of other things!) are concerned. Doubtful variations are often quite playable in bullet.

But how far can one take this? For some players, the sky's the limit. In this chapter, we take a look at some "bullet openings," by which we mean openings that are objectively so bad that they can only be played in bullet.

This raises an obvious and very legitimate question – why would anyone handicap him or herself by playing what many players would term "trash openings?" Apart from the human tendency to delight in perversion, there are real justifications for such openings: 1. As in other forms of chess, it is often advantageous to play something familiar, even if it is suspect. In bullet, this is even more true, because you can play faster in known positions.

2. Conversely, throwing your opponents on their own resources can cost them valuable time, and even if they manage to refute your opening, it may turn out they don't have enough time to finish you off.

3. Bullet openings are usually so bad that your opponents may feel insulted by the way you are playing. Anger clouds the mind, and if your opponents become enraged their judgment will suffer.

4. Similarly, even if your opponents don’t become angry, they may become overconfident and think that anything will win because they are playing an idiot. There is, however, a big difference between playing a bad opening and being a bad player. This psychological trap can be extremely effective, and accounts for the surprising success rate of many bullet openings.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that you play bullet openings, although the whole point of bullet is to have fun, and if adopting (or inventing) a bullet opening is your cup of tea, then go for it. But all bullet players inevitably face bullet openings from time to time, and some of the games in this chapter illustrate how to deal with bullet openings.

With this in mind, let’s have a look at some typical bullet openings. You won’t find any of this in the *Encyclopedia of Chess Openings*, but since you’ve read this far, your literary tastes have already been shown to be more cultivated than that.

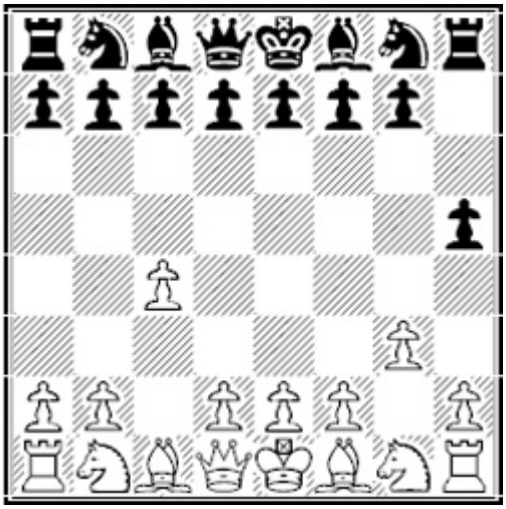
Our first example involves a move that almost all of us played when we first started playing chess. We applaud those who have embraced their inner child by daring to return to this opening.

1.h4 (or 1...h5)

While the immediate advance of the h-pawn has not yet been seen in world championship play, it is actually not as bad as it seems, and might almost be considered one of the more reputable bullet openings.

White (1967) – Black (2286) [A10]

1.c4 h5 2.g3?!



2.g3 plays into Black's hands, as it gives 1...h5 a point. One can surmise that White was ready to play an English opening and wasn't about to take the time to change plans just because of his opponent's first move.

2...h4 3.g4

3.Bg2 is more natural. White is already giving his opponent too much say in the game.

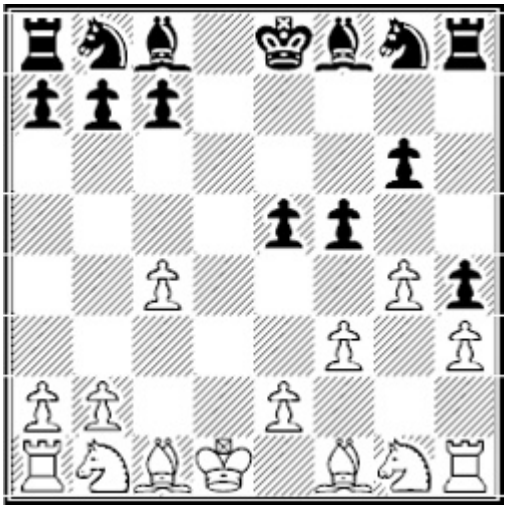
3...g6 4.h3 f5!? 5.f3?

1...h5 and 2...h4 are looking like brilliant moves.

5...d5 6.d3?! d×c4

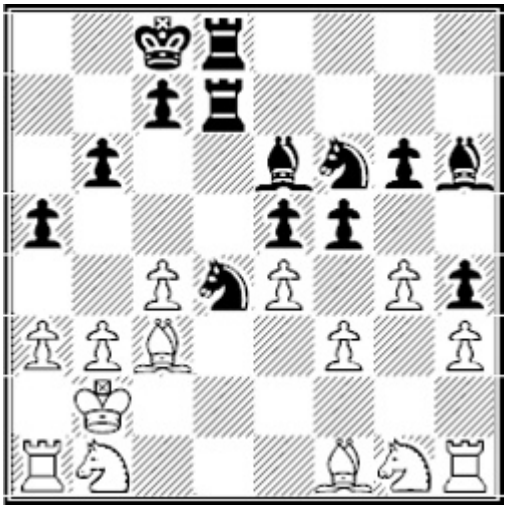
6...d4 was also good.

7.d×c4 Q×d1+ 8.K×d1 e5



Black already has the advantage. White's best chance is to play 9.e4 and tough it out, but he delays this move and things quickly go from bad to worse.

9.Nc3 Be6 10.b3 Nc6 11.Bb2 0-0-0+ 12.Kc2 Bh6 13.Nb1 Nb4+ 14.Kc3 a5 15.a3 Nc6 16.Kc2 Nf6 17.Bg2 Rd7 18.e4 Rhd8 19.Bc3 Nd4+ 20.Kb2 b6 21.Bf1



White's pieces just don't seem to be able to stay developed. It is worth noting that both players had 30 seconds left at this point, so in this game

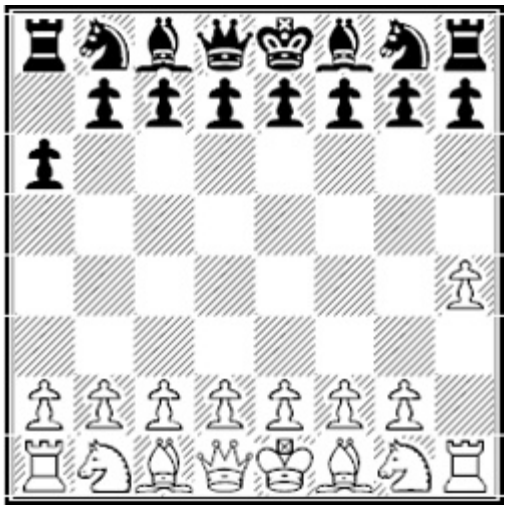
time wasn’t much of a factor. White’s position now collapses.

21...Be3 22.a4 B×g1 23.R×g1 N×f3 24.Rg2 N×e4 25.Rc2 N×c3 26.N×c3 f×g4 27.h×g4 Nd4 28.Rh2 g5 29.Bh3 Rf7 30.Rc1 Rf3 31.Rcc2 e4 32.N×e4 R×b3+ 33.Ka1 Rb4 34.N×g5 N×c2+ 35.R×c2 B×c4 36.Ne4 Rd1+ 0-1

A fluke win for Black? Hardly, as will become apparent. The games with 1.h4 and 1...h5 in this chapter, incidentally, were almost all played by the same person, and there are ideas associated with this opening, which is what makes it dangerous.

White (2257) – Black (2065) [A00]

1.h4 a6

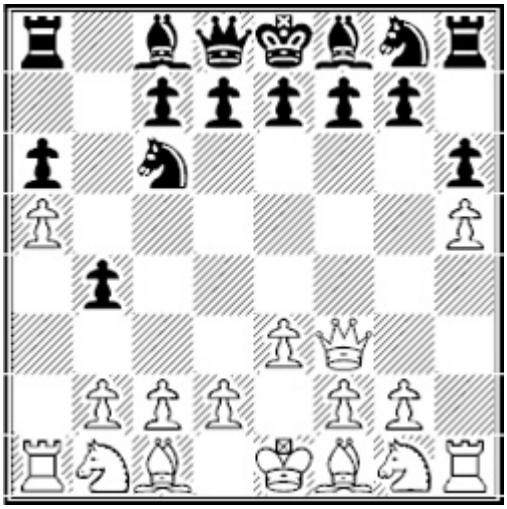


It’s difficult to tell if 1...a6 is a reaction to 1.h4 or simply Black’s all-purpose first move. Since 1...a6 was played instantly, the latter explanation seems right but, as will be seen, 1.h4 seems to direct the play to the other side of the board, and in that sense one can say that Black falls in with his opponent’s plans.

2.h5 h6 3.e3 b5 4.Qf3!?

This is consistent with one of White's basic ideas, which is to put his queen on g3 in order to exert pressure on Black's g7-pawn. The fact that 3...b5 gives White a tempo to carry out this plan is, from White's point of view, just one of those happy coincidences which seem to happen in bullet chess.

4...Nc6 5.a4 b4 6.a5



Objectively Black is fine, and after either 6...e5 or 6...d5, he would soon be able to gain time by exploiting the position of White's queen.

6...e6 7.Qg3 Nf6 8.d4 Bd6 9.f4

9.**Q**×g7? **Rh**7, trapping White's queen, would be an embarrassing mistake. The position is still about equal, with White having 54 seconds remaining and Black having 51 seconds.

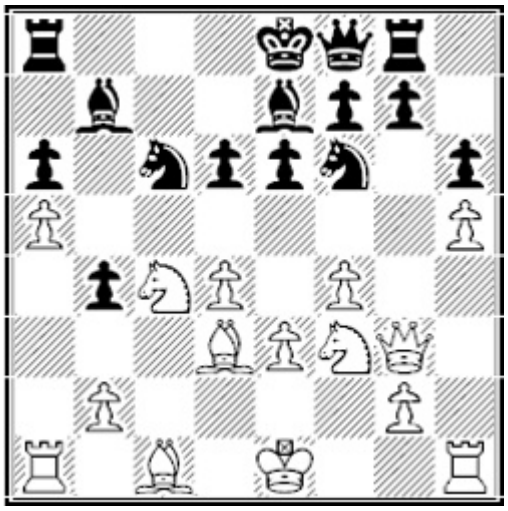
9...Bb7 10.Bd3 Rg8

Black decides not to risk castling kingside, although after 10...0-0!? it wouldn’t be so easy for White to start a real attack, and in the meantime Black would have plenty of ways to create play of his own in the center. In bullet, though, the psychological effect of White’s h5-pawn shouldn’t be underestimated.

11.Nd2 Qe7?! 12.c4

Either overlooking or ignoring 12.e4!?, which forces Black to give up a piece.

12...Qf8 13.c5 Be7 14.Ngf3 d6 15.c×d6 c×d6 16.Nc4



Looking at this position, it is hard to tell which player played the weird opening!

Black is still fine, but he now decides his king position is a problem and “solves” the problem by castling into an attack.

There’s a certain irony to this, since earlier Black was afraid to castle kingside because of White’s h5-pawn. After all, White has a pawn on a5 as

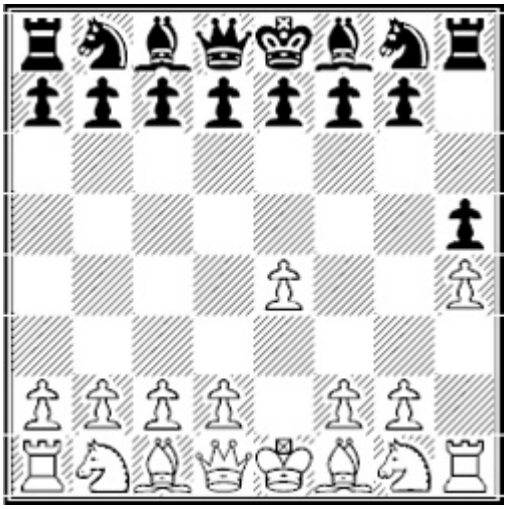
well!

16...0-0-0? 17.Nb6+ Kb8 18.Qf2 Nd7 19.Qe2 Ka7 20.e4 e5 21.d5 Ncb8 22.Be3 N×b6 23.a×b6+ Ka8 24.B×a6 N×a6 25.R×a6+ Kb8 26.0–0 e×f4 27.B×f4 Bf6 28.Rfa1 Qe8 29.Ra8+ B×a8 30.R×a8+ K×a8 31.Qa6+ Kb8 32.Qa7+ Kc8 33.b7+ Kd7 34.b8Q mate 1-0

In the next game, White meets fire with fire, with surprising and at times comedic results.

White (2352) – Black (2289) [B00]

1.e4 h5 2.h4



White falls in with Black's opening in the most dramatic way possible. The players will now play a "normal" bullet game (whatever that means), with the moves ...h7-h5 and h2-h4 thrown in.

2...Nf6!

A good choice, since after 3.e5 Ng4!?, Black has a variation of the Alekhine's Defense which doesn't exist.

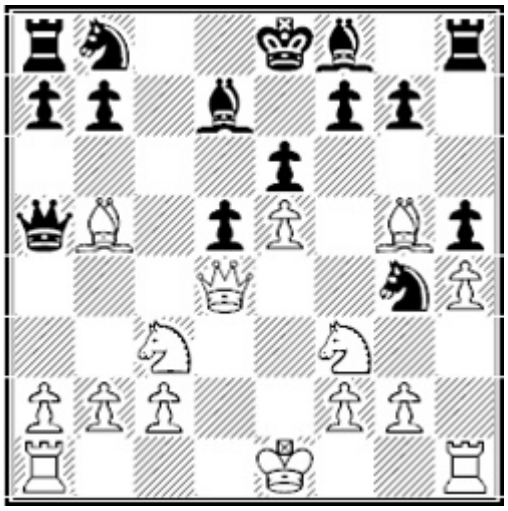
3.Nc3 d5 4.e5 Ng4 5.Nf3 c5 6.d4 c×d4 7.Q×d4 e6

White's weakness on g4 is already more annoying than the corresponding Black weakness on g5.

8.Bb5+ Bd7 9.Bg5?! Qa5! ***(D)***

Each player has 49 seconds left.

10.a4?



This loses a piece because Black's queen pins both White's c3-knight and his a4-pawn. White played this blunder after seven (!) seconds of thought. Can there be any explanation other than that White was thinking more about the fact that Black's first move (1...h5) had worked out so well, rather than about the position on the board?

10...B×b5 11.a×b5 Q×a1+ 12.Nd1

With an extra rook and a ten-second time advantage, Black should have no trouble, but this is bullet chess...

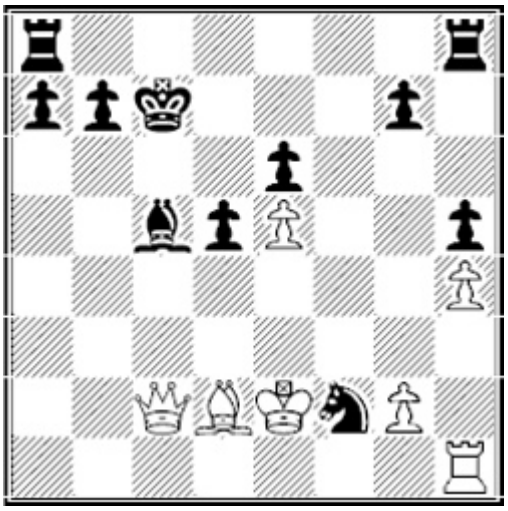
12...Qa5+ 13.Bd2 Q×b5 14.Nc3 Qa6 15.b4 Nc6 16.Qf4 N×b4 17.Nd4 Bc5

Missing 17...Qa1+, which wins more material.

18.Ncb5 N×c2+ 19.Kd1 Qa4?! 20.Nc7+ Kd8? 21.Nd×e6+! f×e6 22.Q×a4

22. N×e6+ first was even better, but one can't fault White for taking Black's queen, just in case it's a mirage.

22...K×c7 23.Q×c2 N×f2+ 24.Ke2



24...N×h1?

After 24... Ne4! (centralization), Black would stand better, with about 20 seconds left for each player.

25.Q×c5+ Kb8 26.Qc6?

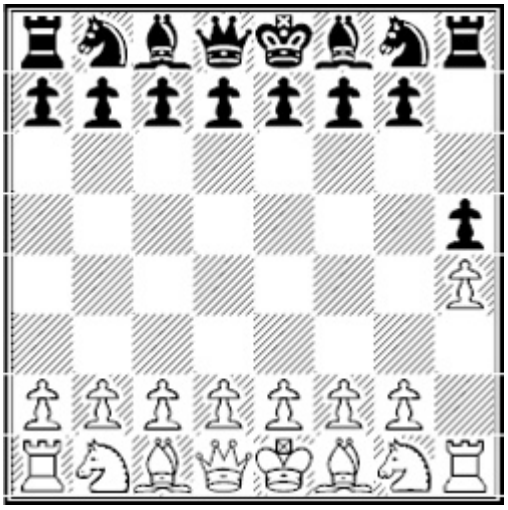
On the brink of victory (26.Qd6+ Kc8 27.Q×e6+), White falls victim to a mouse slip!

26...b×c6 0-1

Here's another example where both players march to the same tune.

White (2258) – Black (2388) [A00]

1.h4 h5



The ultimate compliment – Black copies his opponent's bizarre first move, and then some!

2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Ng5 Ng4

A remarkable opening by any standard.

4.e4 e6 5.Qf3?! Qf6! 6.Qg3?

Surprisingly, White appears to be more disoriented than Black, even though they are fighting on White's turf. The "standard" placement of the queen on

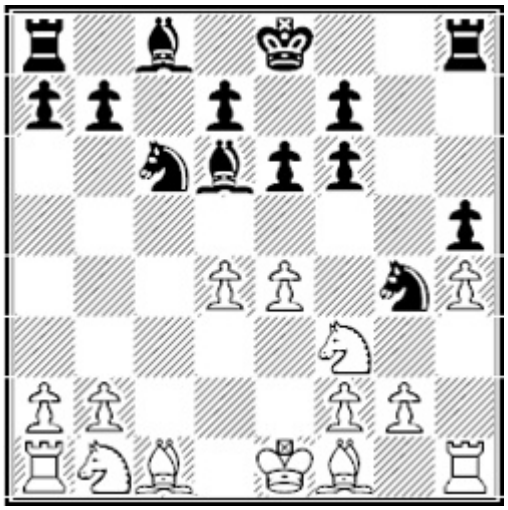
g3 doesn’t work in this position.

6...Bd6

Logical, but the threat against Black’s c7-pawn was illusory, because White’s queen had to guard against ...Q×f2+. In bullet such indirect defenses are sometimes hard to see.

Both 6...Nc6 and 6...Bc5 were stronger.

7.Qf3 Nc6 8.c3 Nce5 9.Q×f6 g×f6 10.Nf3 c5 11.d4 c×d4 12.c×d4 Nc6



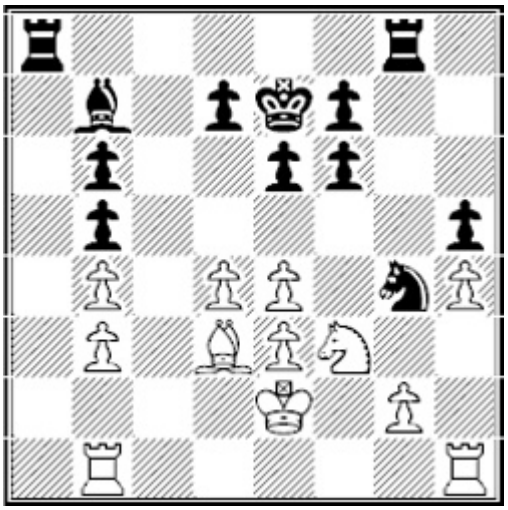
After an early scare, White has come out of the opening with a reasonable position, but now he gets in trouble again by allowing Black’s c6-knight to invade via b4.

13.Nc3?! Nb4! 14.Rb1 b6 15.Be3?! Nc2+ 16.Kd2 Nc×e3 17.f×e3 Bb4 18.Bd3 Bb7 19.Ke2 Rg8 20.Nb5 Ke7

White now has 30 seconds remaining, while Black is in slightly better shape, with 32 seconds. Time doesn’t explain White’s next move, which

was more likely a mouse slip (21.b3? instead of 21.a3!).

21.b3? a6 22.a3 a×b5 23.a×b4



Any position with four sets of doubled pawns deserves a diagram. White is in trouble, as all of Black's pieces are active, and even without queens on the board White's exposed king is a liability. White's reply to Black's next move makes things much worse, though.

23...Ra2+ 24.Ke1?

24.Nd2 Nf2! would have been better for White than the game continuation, although even then White would still have been in trouble.

24...N×e3 25.B×b5 0-1

White resigned, as his position after 25...N×g2+ 26.Kd1 Ne3+ 27.Ke1 B×e4 is hopeless.

These games are certainly entertaining, but surely one can just play normally against such openings? After all, imitation may be the sincerest

form of flattery, but is it really the best way to handle bizarre moves by the other player? Do we have to be dragged down to the opponent's level?

In the next few games, the player facing the bullet opening more or less tries to ignore his opponent's eccentric play.

White (2298) – Black (2343) [B00]

1.e4 h5 2.d4 h4 3.c4

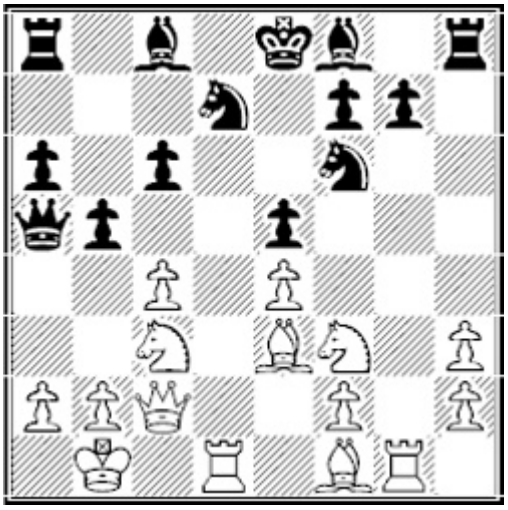
White isn't having any of it. He steadfastly ignores Black's nonsense on the h-file and plays positionally.

3...d6 4.Nc3 c6 5.Nf3 Nd7 6.Be3 h3 7.g×h3

White sees no need to be shy – he just takes the offered pawn, without worrying unduly about his pawn structure.

7...e5 8.d×e5 d×e5 9.Qc2 Qa5 10.0-0-0 Ngf6 11.Kb1 a6 12.Rg1 b5 *(D)*

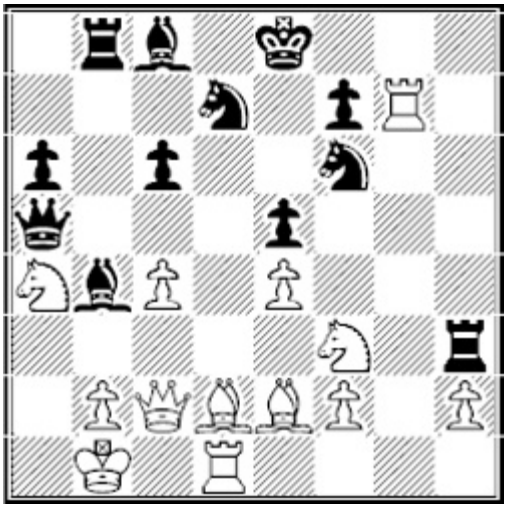
Sharpening the play, although not necessarily to Black's advantage. After 12...b5, Black has a slight time advantage (52 seconds remaining, against White's 48 seconds).



13.a3

13.Rg5, with threats against Black's e5-pawn, was the most critical continuation. Now the game quickly descends into chaos, justifying both players' approach to the opening.

13...b4 14.a×b4 B×b4 15.Na4 Rb8 16.Be2 Ba3!? 17.Bd2! Bb4 18.R×g7 R×h3



19.R×f7?!

Initiating a series of desperado moves by both players, during which both White's and Black's rooks go on rampages.

19...R×f3!? 20.R×d7!? Ra3!? 21.Rd8+!

A difficult move to see.

21...Kf7 22.B×b4?

White falters. After both 22.R×c8! and 22.b×a3!?, White would be on top.

22...R×b4 23.R×c8 Ra×a4 24.R×c6?

White's rook is out of control! Having chewed its way through a pawn, knight and bishop, it captures even more material, but this final meal costs White the game.

After 24.Qd3! Ra1+ 25.Kc2 Qa4+ 26.Kd2, the outcome of this crazy game would still have been in doubt, especially with time being almost equal (about 20 seconds left for each player).

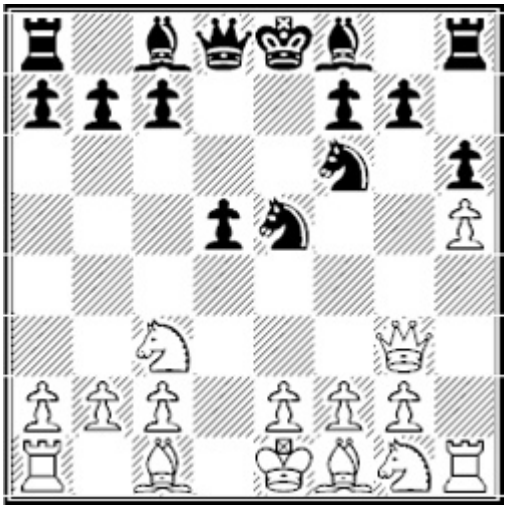
24...Ra1 mate 0-1

The drawback to a purely positional approach to 1.h4 or 1...h5 is that in closed positions advanced h-pawns can yield strategic benefits as well, so it is worth considering a more active response. The principled response to such openings is to seek activity in the center, even if this means surrendering material.

White (2315) – Black (2630) [A00]

1.h4 d5 2.h5 h6 3.d4 Nc6 4.Qd3 Nf6 5.Nc3 e5 6.d×e5 N×e5 7.Qg3 ***(D)***

White has carried out his queen maneuver (Qd1–d3-g3 was the route on this particular occasion), while Black has pretty much ignored White and initiated play in the center. Black doesn't yet have a significant lead in development, however, and therefore he offers his g7-pawn, which White sensibly declines.



7...Bd6!? 8.Bf4 Qe7 9.0–0–0 Bf5 10.N×d5 N×d5 11.R×d5 f6

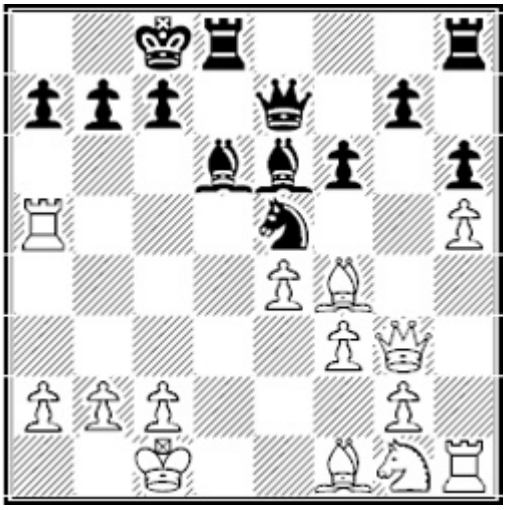
White's unorthodox opening has netted him an extra pawn. The difficulty with White's idea is that his lack of development may lead to some problems. If White can solve these problems easily, by which we mean quickly, then there is no worry, but the general balance of time, development and material is different in bullet than it is in normal chess. In particular, having the initiative in return for a few pawns is usually good compensation. White has 52 seconds left, Black 53 seconds.

12.f3

White is "just a few moves away from consolidating" – but in bullet "a few moves" can be an eternity.

12...0-0-0 13.e4 Be6 14.Ra5? *(D)*

A bad move which gives Black even more play. The simpler 14.Rd1 gives White time to develop his kingside pieces.



14...Bb4!

This strong move fully exploits White's lack of development and the exposed position of his wayward rook.

15.R×a7

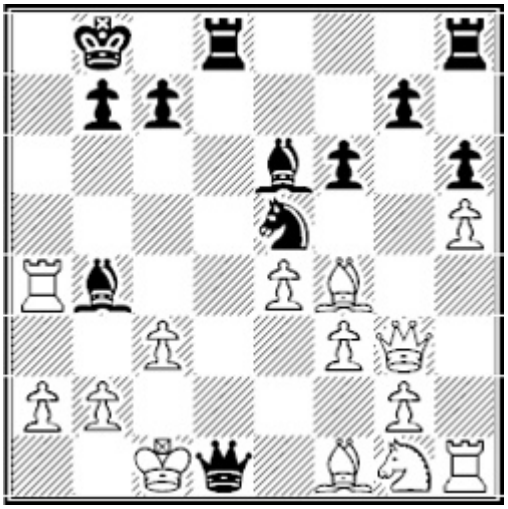
Losing at once, but it isn't fair to criticize this move, as White's mistakes occurred earlier. At this point White may have been rattled, but after 15.R×e5 f×e5 16.B×e5 Qc5!, threatening 17...Qe3+, White is still in deep trouble. Generally speaking, once a player comes up with a plan in bullet (here Rd5-a5xa7), the player will not change course unless there is a direct one or two-move forced win for their opponent (and they see it!). If you can spring a trap which takes a few moves to be revealed, your opponent is likely to fall for it.

15...Kb8 16.Ra4 Qd7 17.c3

This does not stop the threat.

17...Qd1 mate 0-1 ***(D)***

White (2476) – Black (2942) [A00]



1.h4 e5

In this game, Black ignores his opponent's opening, at least up to a point, and concentrates on rapid development. In bullet, such an approach can often mean giving up material, because pawns may not be worth the time it takes to defend them.

2.h5 h6 3.d4 e×d4 4.Q×d4 Nc6 5.Qe3+ Be7 6.Qg3 Nf6

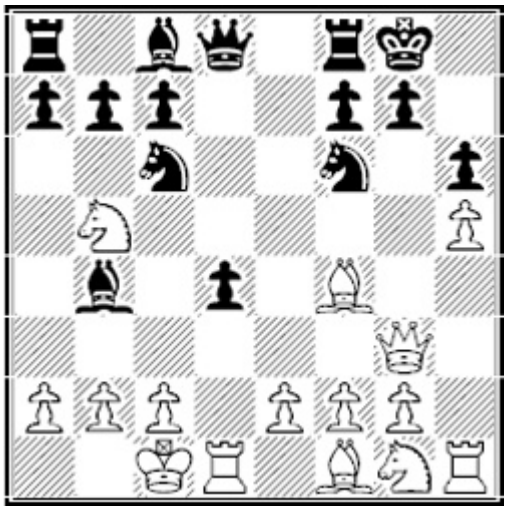
6...Bf6 and 6...Nd4!? were reasonable alternatives, but these moves are not obvious and take time to find.

7.Nc3

Ignoring Black's g7-pawn. Objectively speaking, taking is also fine, but it would give Black an even bigger advantage in development and defending is not for the faint of heart in bullet.

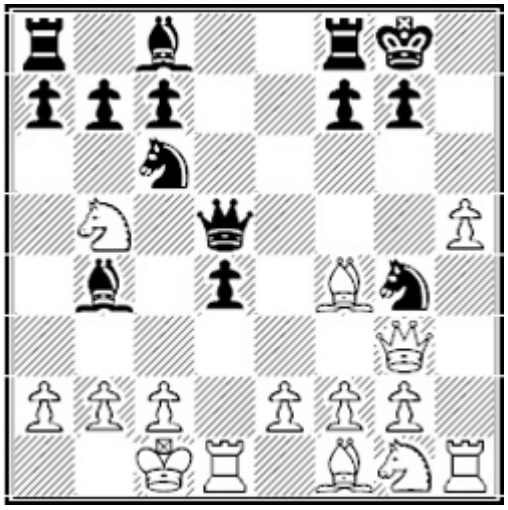
7...d5 8.Bf4 Bb4 9.0-0-0 d4 10.Nb5 0-0 ***(D)***

11.B×h6



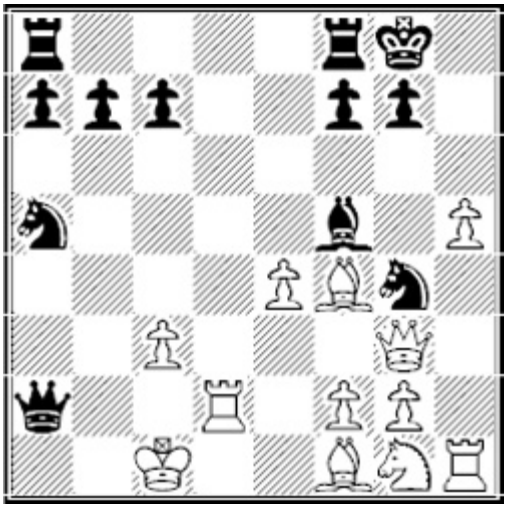
11.N×c7 was even stronger. White's opening has succeeded, as Black is playing with fire. But fire can burn both players.

11...Ng4 12.Bf4 Qd5!



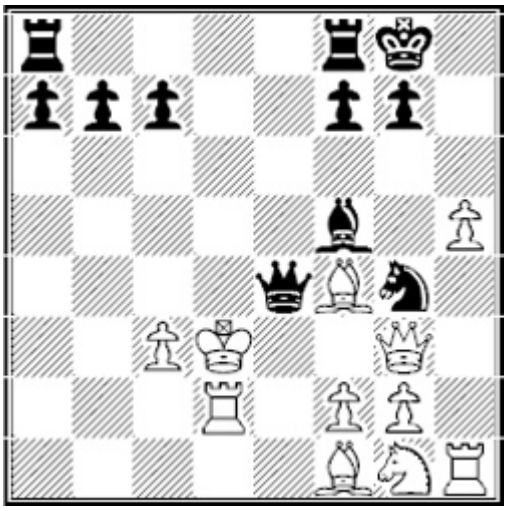
A very strong double threat (13...Q×b5 and 13...Q×a2). At this point time was quite close with White having 47 seconds remaining, while Black had 49 seconds. Here, however, White completely panics and uses 21 seconds to find a losing move. After 13.a3! White is equal or perhaps still a little better, but it isn't so easy to find moves like this while under pressure.

13.e3? Q×a2 14.c3 d×c3 15.N×c3 B×c3 16.b×c3 Bf5 17.e4 Na5 18.Rd2



Black now has a forced mate.

18...Nb3+ 19.Kd1 Qb1+ 20.Ke2 Nc1+ 21.Ke1 Nd3+ 22.Ke2 Qe1+ 23.K×d3 Q×e4 mate 0-1

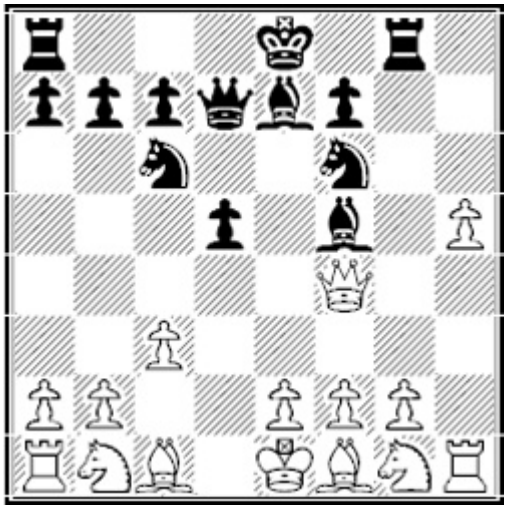


White (2311) – Black (2227) [A00]

1.h4 e5 2.h5 h6 3.d4 e×d4 4.Q×d4 Nf6 5.Qe3+ Be7 6.Qg3

A familiar idea. Here Black chooses to completely ignore White's threat against his g7-pawn. 6...Bd6!? 7.Bf4 (7Q×g7? Rh7 traps White's queen) B×f4 8.Q×f4 would have defused White's plan, leaving Black with a comfortable position, but Black wants more so he sacrifices two pawns (at least, that's Black's story, and he's sticking to it).

6...d5 7.Q×g7 Rg8?! 8.Q×h6 Bf5 9.c3 Nc6 10.Qf4 Qd7



Black steadfastly adheres to his plan of rapid development. Here White has 51 seconds remaining, while Black has 44 seconds left. With two extra pawns and a time advantage, things look good for White, but his position is not that easy to play...

11.Qa4?! Rg4!? 12.f4

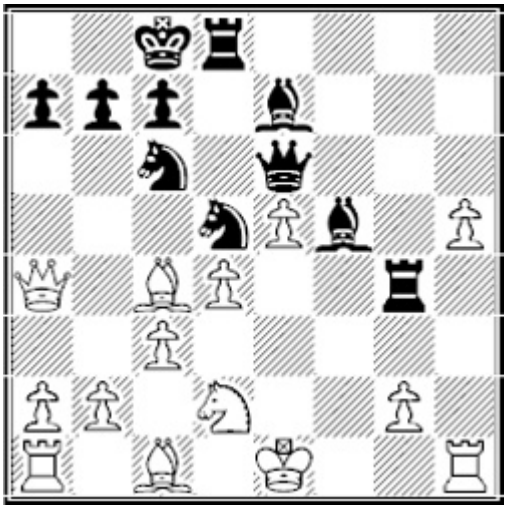
A serious concession, but after 12.Qd1, Black would have six pieces developed and White would have none – a frightening imbalance which very likely would have led to serious trouble for White.

12...d4!? 13.Nf3 d3 14.e×d3 0-0-0 15.d4 Qe6+ 16.Ne5 Nd5

It's hard to define Black's threats, but White clearly has to play exactly, which is never easy in bullet chess. White takes five seconds for his next move and, as is so often the case, comes up with a lemon.

17.Bc4? f6 18.Nd2 f×e5 19.f×e5 ***(D)***

19...N×e5! 20.d×e5



After this, White's defenses collapse, but the desperate 20.0-0!? can be met by the surprising 20...Bc2! 21.Q×c2 R×g2!+ 22.K×g2 Qg4+, mating.

20...Q×e5+ 21.Kf1 Ne3+ 22.Kf2 R×g2+ 23.Ke1 Qg3 mate 0-1

Admittedly, 1.h4 didn't do too well in the previous few games, but the positions White achieved were not at all bad, and in bullet playing strength has a lot to do with the outcome (arguably much more than in normal, tournament chess, where computer-assisted preparation and tedious defensive technique can make up for a host of inadequacies).

By now some readers might be thinking that it must be possible to simply punish this opening, without getting excited and falling into the psychological traps discussed at the start of this chapter.

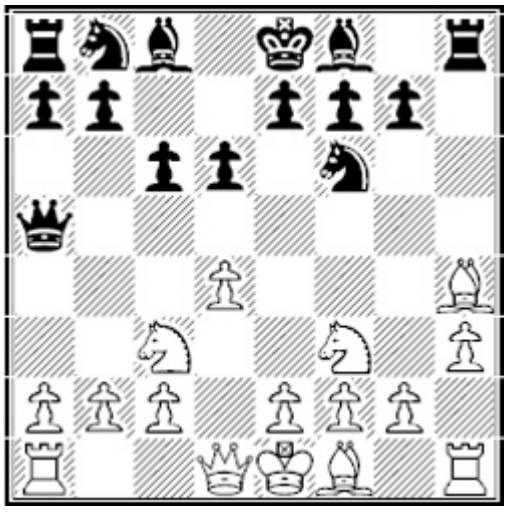
Maybe, but let's look at a few examples where attempts were made to directly exploit 1.h4 or 1...h5, as the case may be.

White (2214) – Black (2326) [A00]

1.Nc3 h5 2.Nf3 h4 3.h3 d6 4.d4 c6 5.Bg5

White immediately goes after Black's exposed h4-pawn. Black reckons that the time White spends in this endeavor won't be worth it. It turns out that Black is right, but only after some help from his opponent.

5...Qa5 6.B×h4 Nf6



7.e3?

After this plausible move, White suddenly finds himself in trouble. 7.Qd2!, unpinning White's c3-knight, was much better.

7...Ne4 8.Qd3?! Bf5 9.0-0-0

As the extent of the disaster becomes apparent, White realizes that 9.Qc4 b5! 10.Qb3 Be6! doesn't help, so he castles and hopes to salvage something from the wreckage.

9...N×f2 10.B×f2

10.Q×f5? Q×f5 doesn't help.

10...B×d3 11.B×d3 Nd7

With a queen and a pawn for two pieces, plus a time advantage of seven seconds, Black need only play carefully to win.

12.Rhe1 e6 13.Kb1 Be7 14.e4 0-0-0 15.Bg3 Kb8 16.Nd2 Ka8 17.Nc4 Qc7 18.Be2 e5 19.d×e5 N×e5 20.Rd2 Bg5 21.Rd3 N×d3 22.B×d3 Qe7 23.Rd1 d5 24.e×d5 c×d5 25.Na3 a6 26.Ka1 Bh4 27.Bh2 Bf6 28.Nab1 Qb4 29.a3 Qa5 30.Ka2 Rc8 31.Be2 Rhd8 32.Rd3 d4 33.Ne4 Qd5+ 34.Ka1 Q×e4 35.Bg4 R×c2 36.Bf3 Q×d3 0-1

The preceding game was a debacle for White, but his pursuit of Black's h4-pawn only set up the losing blunder. It didn't, in itself, cost him the game. Still, in bullet it can be dangerous to leave yourself too small a margin of safety.

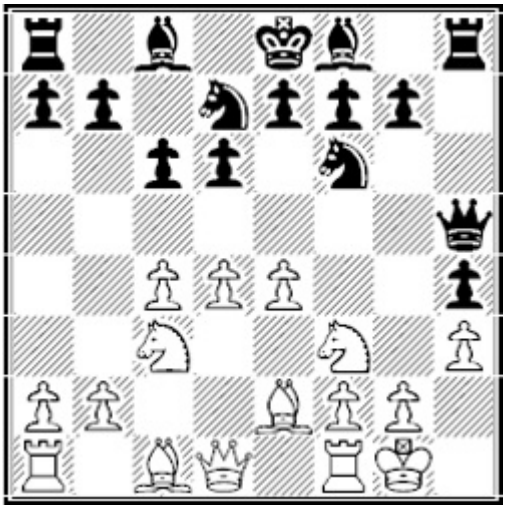
White is more successful in the next game, as he first develops, then goes after Black's exposed pawn. Curiously, though, he misses a much stronger continuation which would have done much more than just win a relatively unimportant pawn.

White (2534) – Black (2336) [A40]

1.d4 h5 2.c4 h4 3.h3 d6 4.Nc3 c6 5.Nf3 Qa5 6.e4 Nf6 7.Be2 Nbd7 8.0-0

Up to this point, White has ignored his opponent, but Black's next move provokes him into trying to refute Black's opening. White's instincts were right, in that he sensed the critical moment, but he didn't find the most convincing way of punishing his opponent.

8...Qh5?



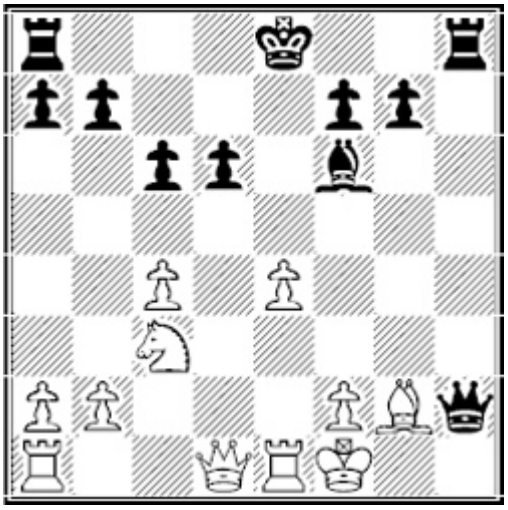
9.Bg5

A good move, except there was a much better one: 9.Ng5! Qg6 10.f4!, and Black gets rolled off the board. In this line, Black's h4-pawn is worse than irrelevant, because Black can no longer evict White's powerful g5-knight with ...h7-h6.

9...Qg6 10.B×h4 e5

10...N×e4 11.N×e4 Q×e4 12.Bd3 is good for White, so Black reconciles himself to playing a pawn down, hoping that the open h-file will give him compensation. With each player having around 45 seconds left, there is plenty of time left for Black to make threats, but White keeps his cool.

11.Re1 Be7 12.Bg3 Nh5 13.Bh2 Ndf6?! 14.d×e5 B×h3 15.Nh4 Qg5 16.e×f6 B×f6 17.g3 Nf4 18.Bf3 R×h4 19.Kh1 Rh8 20.g×f4 Bg2+ 21.B×g2 Q×f4 22.Kg1 Q×h2+ 23.Kf1 *(D)* While White may have missed some stronger continuations, he has still emerged from the complications with an extra piece and a slight edge in time (24 seconds left to Black's 22 seconds), and he now consolidates successfully with a series of fairly precise moves.



23...0-0-0 24.Qg4+ Kb8 25.Rad1 Be5 26.Rd3 Rh6 27.Rh3 R×h3 28.Q×h3 Qf4 29.Qf3 Qd2 30.Qe2 Qf4 31.Nd1 Rh8 32.Ne3 g5 33.Qf3 Qh2 34.Ng4 Qh4 35.N×e5 d×e5 36.Qf6 g4 37.Q×h4 R×h4 38.Rd1 Rh3 39.B×h3 g3 40.Kg1 g×f2+ 41.K×f2 Kc7 42.Kf3 Kb6 43.Bf5 Kc5 44.Rd7 K×c4 45.R×f7 b5 46.Re7 a5 47.R×e5 b4 48.Re6 c5 49.Rb6 a4 50.Be6+ Kd3 51.b3 a3 52.Rc6 c4 53.Rc5 Kc3 54.R×c4+ Kb2 55.R×b4 K×a2 56.Ra4 Kb2 57.R×a3 1–0

White ran out of time, while Black still had five seconds left.

The previous examples have helped us explore the three basic approaches to an unorthodox opening: accommodate it by showing it some respect; ignore it and hope it blows itself up; or try to refute it by strong, aggressive moves. The next game mixes several of these strategies.

White (2167) – Black (2353) [A00]

1.g3 h5 2.h3

White's approach in this game defies categorization, as he first pays attention to Black's opening by moving his own kingside pawns, then he

tries to refute it by sacrificing.

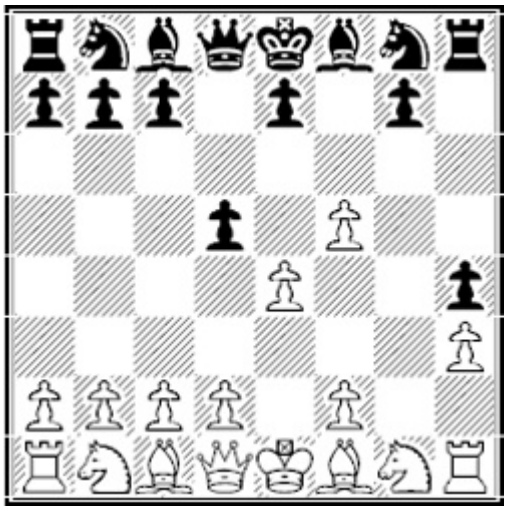
2...h4 3.g4 f5

The “standard” way to deal with the advance of White’s g3-pawn.

4.g×f5

Creativity can take time! White has already used five seconds more than his opponent.

4...d5 5.e4

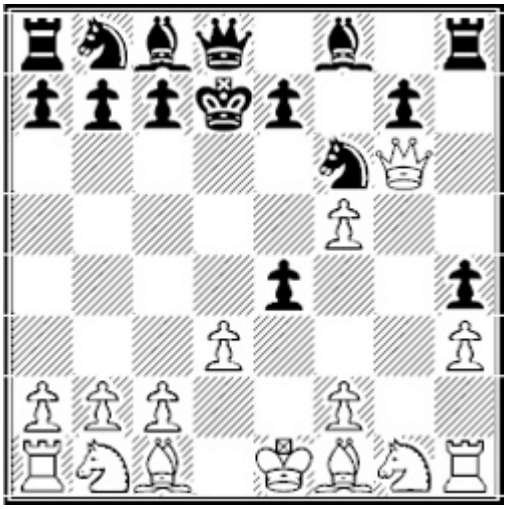


After another five seconds of thought. Don’t bother trying to look this opening up in any textbooks – you won’t find it.

5...d×e4 6.Qg4 Nf6?

6...Qd5! was better, after which the position remains balanced (7.Nc3 Q×f5 8.Q×e4). Now White gets the attack he was looking for, thanks to the weakness on g6 created by 1...h5 and 3...f5.

7.Qg6+ Kd7 8.d3!



Opening lines to Black’s king. Each player has around 48 seconds remaining.

8...c6?! 9.Nc3

9.d×e4 was even stronger.

9...e×d3 10.Nf3! b5

A desperate attempt by Black to find a hiding place for his king.

11.Bf4! c5 12.0-0-0

White ruthlessly completes his development. Black obviously can’t survive this position, can he? Remember, it’s bullet...

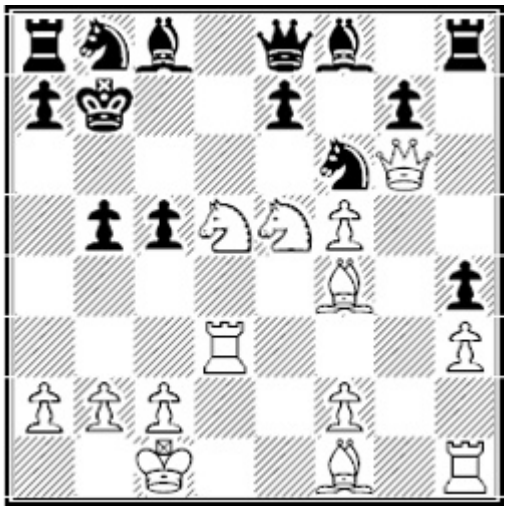
12...Kc6 13.R×d3

13.B×d3 (development!) was better.

13...Qe8 14.Ne5+

White took a long time on this move, looking for the knockout blow. There are many of them, and 14.Ne5+ is one. With 33 seconds remaining, White shouldn't have any trouble.

14...Kb6 15.Nd5+ Kb7



Black is completely lost on the board, but White has already fallen behind by ten seconds trying to find a mate, so in one sense Black's opening strategy is succeeding, although his kingwalk was hardly planned!

We shall deal with intentional king wandering as a bullet opening in a moment.

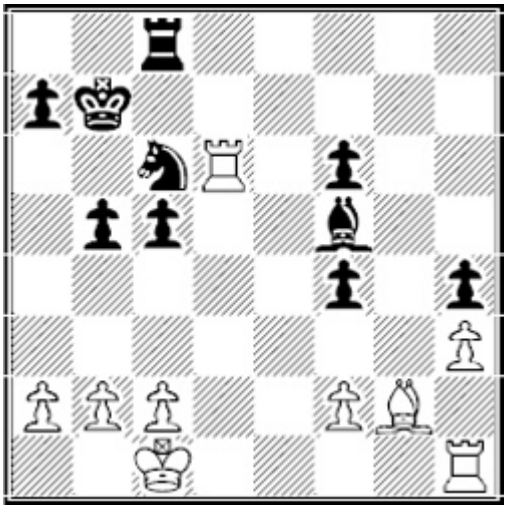
16.N×f6?! Q×g6 17.N×g6 e×f6 18.Bg2+ Nc6 19.N×h8 B×f5 20.Rd2 g5 21.Nf7?

An attempt to simplify the position, but 21.Bd6 held onto White's material advantage.

21...g×f4 22.Nd6+ B×d6 23.R×d6 Rc8 ***(D)***

24.R×c6?

A typical bullet mistake. White wasted several seconds on this move, leaving himself with only 15 seconds to finish off his opponent. The pin along the h1–a8 diagonal was paralyzing Black, and White should have left well enough alone and played 24.Rhd1, threatening 25.R×c6 R×c6 26.Rd6, when 24...Kb6 25.R×f6 doesn't help. White now emerges with a winning ending, but it still takes time to harvest Black's exposed pawns.



24...R×c6 25.Re1 Kb6 26.B×c6 K×c6 27.Re7

All well and good, but White has been playing at the snail's pace of one second per move, and is starting to run out of time.

27...B×h3 28.Rh7

And here White took two seconds to realize that Black's bishop no longer covers h7. White is winning on the board, but can't free himself from the nagging feeling that he "missed something" earlier (which he certainly did).

28...Bf5 29.R×h4 f3 30.Rf4 Be6 31.R×f3?! Kd5?! 32.R×f6 b4 33.Rf8 a5

Black has maintained his ten-second lead, and now has 18 seconds remaining to White's eight seconds.

34.Ra8 a4 35.R×a4 Kc4 36.Ra5 Bf5 37.a3 b3 38.c×b3+ Kd4 39.Rb5?

Even if White has reduced his ambitions to drawing, the goal of eliminating Black's last pawn was most easily achieved with 39.b4! White has six seconds left...

39...Be6 40.b4 c4 41.Rc5 Bd7 42.Kc2?! Ba4+ 43.Kd2 Bd7 44.a4?

Two seconds left...

44...B×a4 45.f3

One second...

45...Bb3 46.R×c4+!

Finally!

46...B×c4 ½-½

White ran out of time and Black had no material to mate

1...g5 (or **1...h6** and **2...g5**)

We now turn to a different opening, where Black defends with 1...g5 or, if White moves his d-pawn on his first move or plays 1.Nf3, with the preparatory 1...h6, followed by 2...g5.

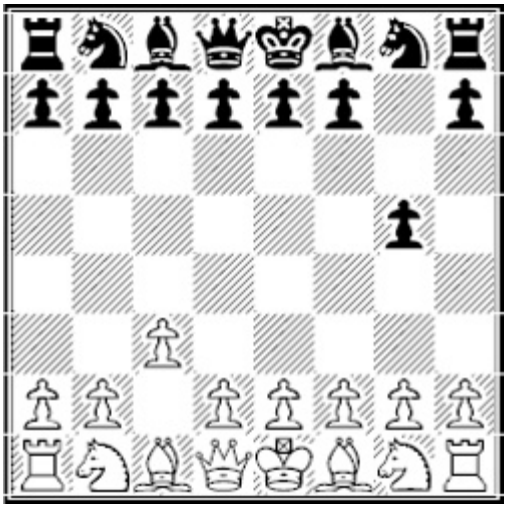
The following games were all played by the same proponent of this system, which seems to have more justification than 1.h4 (which, curiously enough, prevents Black's defensive system).

We suspect that our 1...g5 player, while not as strong as our 1.h4 champion in absolute terms, has at least as much fun with his opening. His results, in terms of his expected performance relative to his rating, are also probably no worse.

This indicates that 1...g5 yields many of the same psychological advantages as 1...h5, as well as being somewhat sounder, and therefore has to be taken seriously by White players.

White (1843) – Black (1910) [A00]

1.c3 g5



Here it is! 1...g5 is not a move you see every day!

From the psychological point of view, 1...g5 is not much different from 1...h5. Against both moves, White's instinctive reaction is that Black

doesn’t know what he’s doing, and that such impudence should be punished without much difficulty. If White plays contemptuously, though, he is likely to regret it.

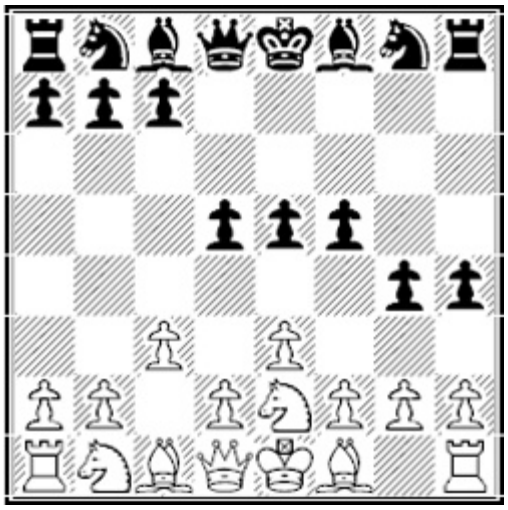
As with 1...h5 (and similar openings), White also has to decide whether to give Black’s opening some respect, ignore it, or try to refute it.

Keep in mind that if you are taken by surprise, you will have only one minute to decide...

2.Nf3?

Of the various approaches which White could adopt, this is one of the worst, as it fully justifies Black’s first move.

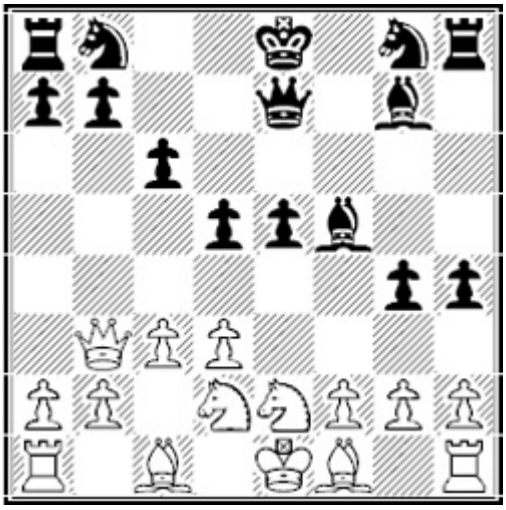
2...g4 3.Ng5 e5 4.Ne4 d5 5.Ng3 h5 6.e3 h4 7.Ne2 f5



Apart from gaining a slight lead in time, White can’t be satisfied with the results of the opening. After 8.d4!?, Black’s slight weakness on f4 may give White some compensation for his spatial disadvantage, but Black’s position

would still be easier to play. White misses this opportunity and his position quickly goes downhill.

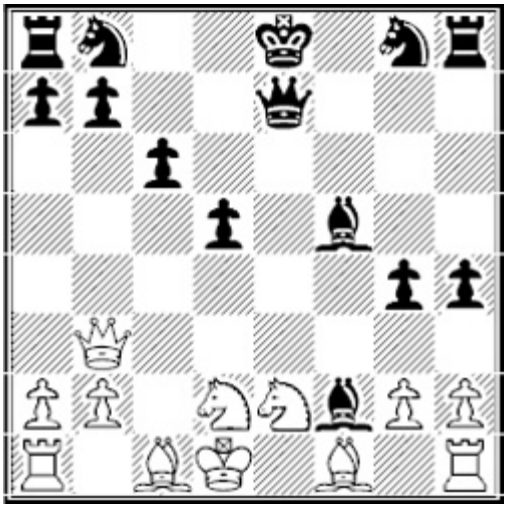
8.d3?! Bg7 9.Qb3 c6 10.Nd2 Qe7 11.e4?! Be6 12.e×f5 B×f5



13.d4?

This was right five moves ago, but now it’s too late. Black has developed some of his pieces and 13.d4? just loses an important pawn.

13...e×d4 14.c×d4 B×d4 15.Kd1 B×f2



16.Nc3?

Given White's sad position, we won't try to suggest a better move, but we couldn't suggest a worse one.

16...Nd7?

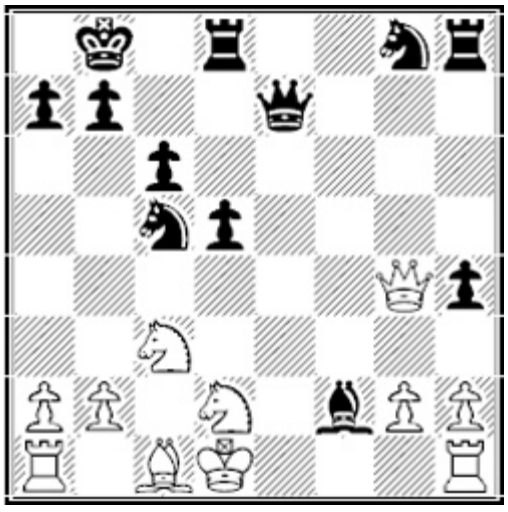
Black's unorthodox opening would have claimed another victim after 16...Qe1 mate. We give the remaining moves to illustrate the point that anything can happen in a bullet game.

17.Be2 Nc5 18.Qb4 0–0–0

18...Qh7!, threatening 19...Bc2 mate, was better.

19.B×g4 B×g4+ 20.Q×g4+ Kb8? ***(D)***

A tactical oversight which goes unpunished.



21.Qe2?

21.Qf4+ and 22.Q×f2 won a piece.

21...Bd4 22.Q×e7 N×e7

With an extra pawn and a time advantage of a few seconds, Black is still on top, but White has a lot more to play for than when he was being mated six moves ago.

23.Nf3 B×c3 24.b×c3 Nd3?!

24...Ne4 was better.

25.Kc2 Nf4? 26.Rb1?

White clearly has a blind spot on f4, since 26.B×f4+ wins a piece.

26...N×g2 27.Rg1 h3 28.Ng5 Rdf8

Not really a mistake, but not worth the six seconds Black spent on it.

29.N×h3 R×h3

And now Black is down to four seconds, while his opponent still has 13 seconds – a fatal disadvantage.

30.R×g2 Nf5 31.Bf4+ Kc8 32.Re1 a5 33.Rg5 1-0

Black ran out of time.

Since Black missed a mate in one in a much better position, his opening in the preceding game can hardly be considered to have failed, although the same can't be said for Black's technique...

The next two games reveal some more ideas behind Black's system. Since Black's g7-pawn goes to g5 very early, it should come as no surprise that

dark square themes emerge.

White (1724) – Black (1913) [A40]

1.d4 h6

A necessary preliminary to ...g7-g5.

2.c4

In bullet, many players find it difficult to switch gears with 2.e4 in this type of position, but that would be the best test of Black's idea.

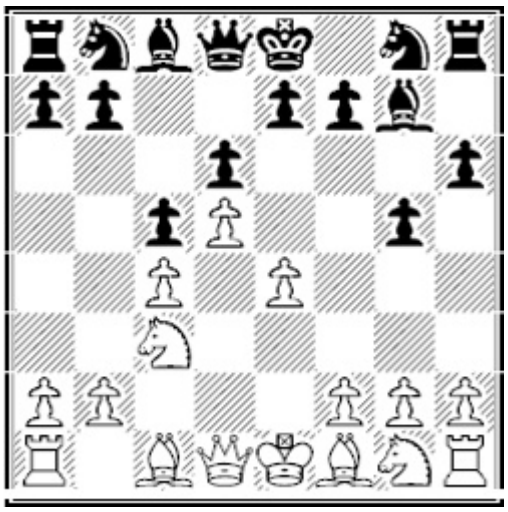
2...g5 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 c5

Black's opening idea, which aims to weaken the dark squares in White's position while at the same time trying to get ahead on time by playing something familiar.

5.d5 d6 ***(D)***

6.f4

An overreaction, brought on by an instinctive contempt for Black's first few moves.



6...B×c3+!? 7.b×c3 Qa5 8.Qc2 g×f4 9.B×f4 Nf6 10.Bd3

10.e5? is met by 10...Nh5.

10...Nbd7

Black has achieved a playable position and has 54 seconds left, against White's 50 seconds.

11.Nf3 Nh5?! 12.Bd2 f6?! 13.0-0

13.e5!?, threatening 14.Bg6+ and 15.B×h5, would have transformed the position to White's advantage.

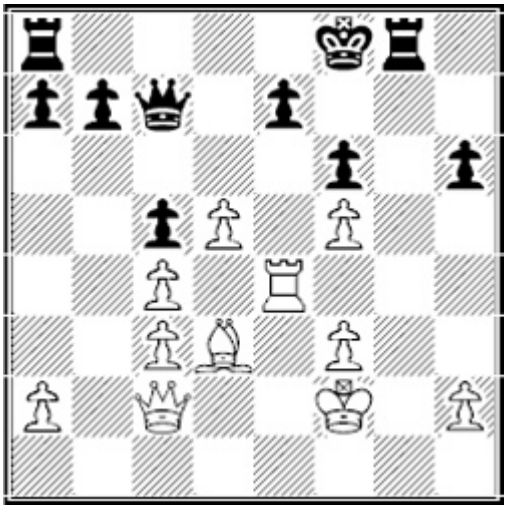
13...Ne5! 14.N×e5 d×e5 15.Rf5?

Either an unsound exchange sacrifice or a blunder. Either way, Black is happy to take White's rook.

15...B×f5 16.e×f5 Nf4 17.B×f4 e×f4 18.Re1?

18.Rf1, followed by 19.R×f4, was better.

18...Kf8 19.Re4 f3! 20.g×f3 Rg8+ 21.Kf2 Qc7



Bullet chess is frequently an interesting mix of positional ideas and cheap, one-move threats. Here White overlooks one of the latter, which shows they are often worth making.

22.Bf1? Q×h2+ 23.Ke3 Qg1+?

Black is so psychologically committed to winning on the dark squares that he misses the simple 23...Q×c2.

24.Kd3? Q×f1+ 25.Qe2 Qb1+ 26.Ke3 Rg1 27.d6? Re1 28.d×e7+ Ke8 29.Q×e1 Q×e1+ 30.Kf4 Q×c3 31.Re6 Q×c4+ 32.Kg3 Q×a2 0-1

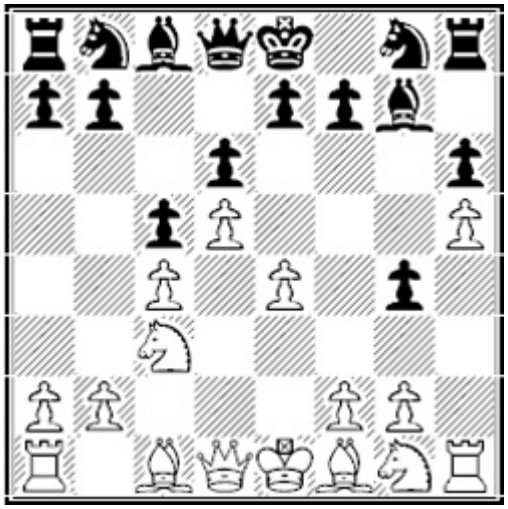
In the next game, Black manages to execute more or less the same plan, with equally happy results (from his point of view).

White (1899) – Black (1886) [A40]

1.d4 h6 2.e4 g5 3.c4 Bg7 4.Nc3 c5 5.d5 d6 6.h4

White attempts to refute Black’s opening but fails.

6...g4 7.h5



7...B×c3+!?

According to plan.

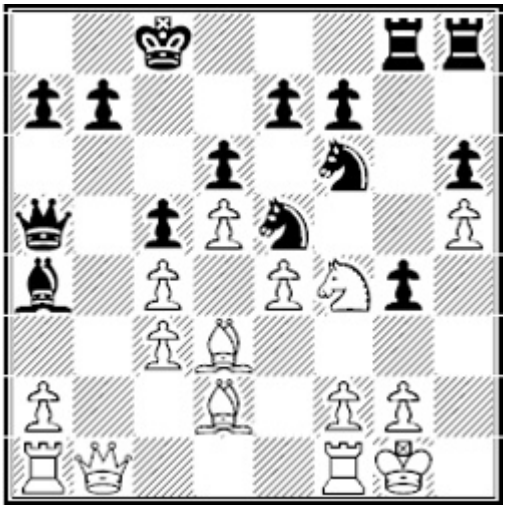
8.b×c3 Qa5 9.Bd2 Nf6 10.Bd3 Nbd7 11.Qc2 Ne5 12.Ne2 Bd7

12...b5!? was more forcing, but Black has a good position in any event, plus a small lead in time (50 seconds remaining to White's 47 seconds).

13.0-0?

Castling into Black's attack.

13...0-0-0 14.Nf4 Ba4 15.Qb1 Rdg8



16.g3?

This makes things easier for Black, but with a six-second lead in time and a clear plan (...Rg8-g5 and ...N×h5), Black had every expectation of winning anyway.

16...Nf3+ 17.Kg2 N×d2 18.Qb2 N×f1 19.B×f1 Rg5

Back to Plan A.

20.Re1 N×h5 21.N×h5 R×h5 22.Qd2 f6 23.Qf4 Rg5 24.Re3 Bd7 25.Be2 h5 26.e5 d×e5 27.Qe4 Bf5

An ignominious end.

28.d6 B×e4+ 0-1

Since Black still had 28 seconds left, White resigned.

These impressive positional results shouldn’t give the reader the wrong idea. Black’s opening can be more venomous than that...

White (1999) – Black (1959) [A40]

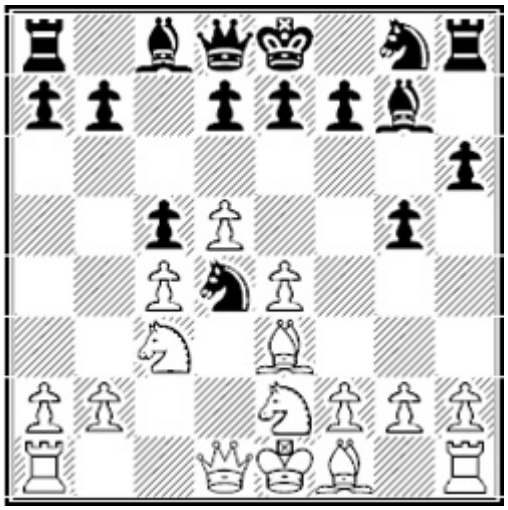
1.d4 h6 2.c4 g5 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 c5 5.Be3

A reasonable attempt to maintain the tension in the center.

5...Nc6 6.d5 Nd4 7.Nge2 ***(D)***

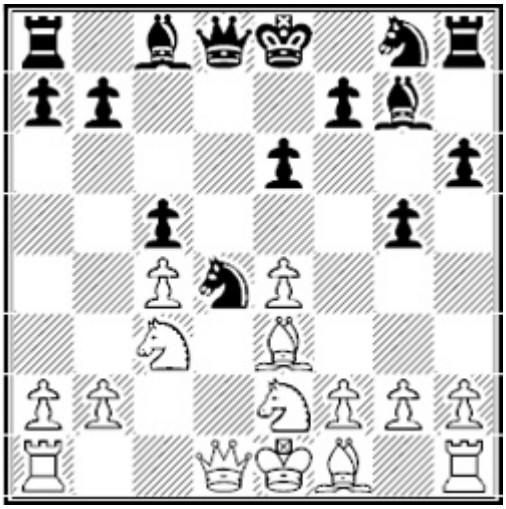
In analogous positions in the Rat or Modern Defense, this move forces the exchange of Black's powerful d4-knight, but here the situation is different.

7...e5!



Because he hasn't yet moved his d7-pawn, Black is able to maintain his knight on d4, which gives him at least an equal position. White now begins to stray, capturing Black's e-pawn *en passant*, perhaps thinking (or hoping) that Black would recapture with his d4-knight.

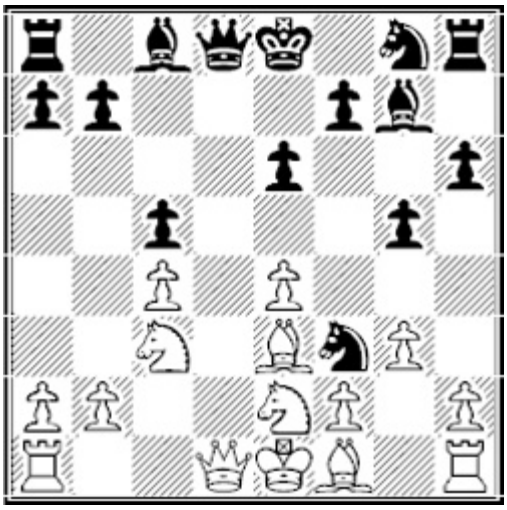
8.d×e6?! d×e6



White now realizes that capturing on e6 didn’t work. Black’s d4-knight remains the pride of his position, and since White can’t get rid of it, he decides to just ignore it and complete his development.

Unfortunately, White forgets that Black’s d4-knight can also move.

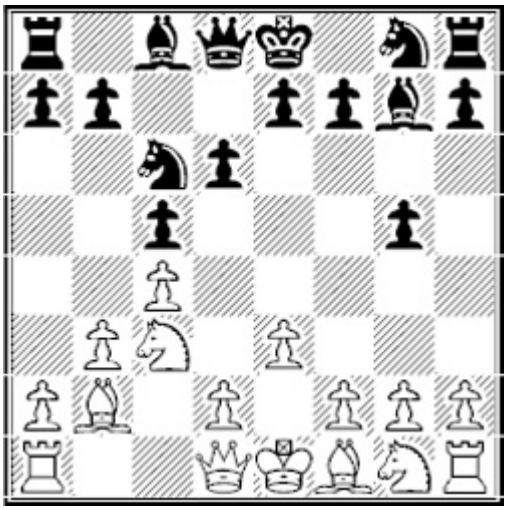
9.g3? Nf3 mate 0-1



This game took less time to play than it takes to read over. A fluke win? Perhaps, but check out the next game...

White (1899) – Black (1921) [A10]

1.c4 g5 2.b3 Bg7 3.Nc3 c5 4.Bb2 Nc6 5.e3 d6



6.h4

White proceeds positionally, in a manner of speaking.

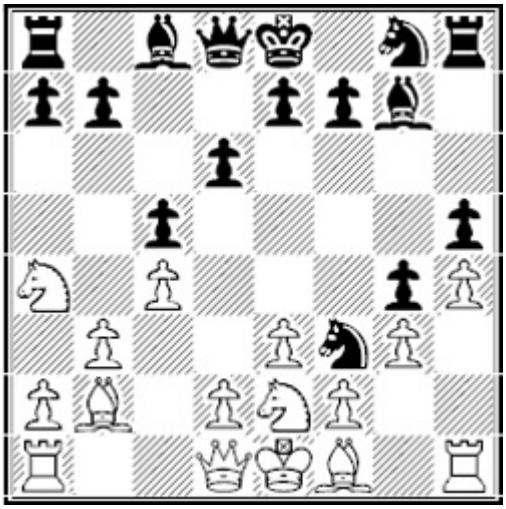
6...g4 7.g3 h5 8.Nge2 Ne5!?

This irritating move turns out to be more than just annoying.

9.Na4?

This allows two mates in one!

9...Nf3 mate 0-1



Another win in less than 20 seconds! Both these games were won by the same player and, even more remarkably, were played within half an hour of one another.

In the following game, White again fails to pay sufficient attention to his opponent's opening and ends up with a serious positional disadvantage.

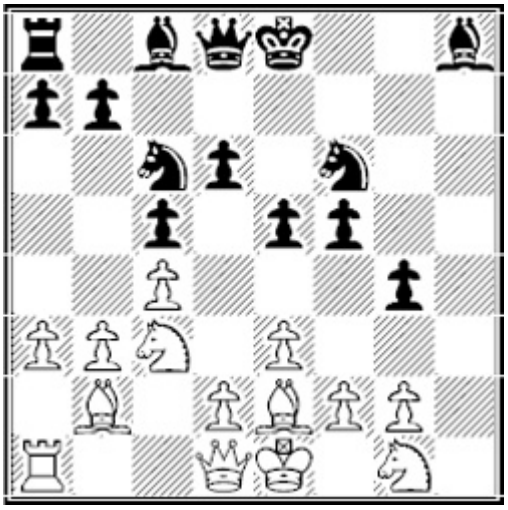
White (1805) – Black (1928) [A10]

1.c4 g5 2.b3 Bg7 3.Nc3 c5 4.Bb2 Nc6 5.e3 d6 6.Nf3? g4

Another triumph for Black's opening, as White's knight is driven back to g1.

7.Ng1 h5 8.Be2 f5 9.h3 Nf6 10.h×g4 h×g4 11.R×h8+ B×h8 12.a3 e5 *(D)*

With a four-second lead (48 seconds for White, against 52 seconds for Black) and more space, Black has every reason to be happy. All he has to do now is consolidate his spatial advantage, while White has the more arduous task finding counterplay.



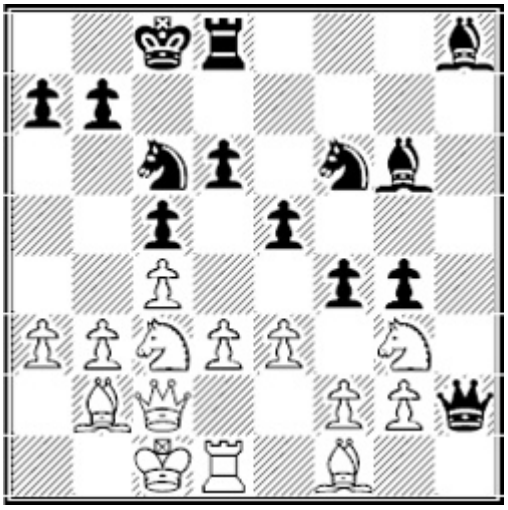
13.Qc2 Be6 14.d3 Qd7 15.0-0-0 0-0-0 16.Bf1

White withdraws his e2-bishop to its original square, in order to (re)develop his g1-knight, which earlier retreated to *its* original square. Needless to say, this is not an encouraging course of events from White's point of view.

16...Qh7 17.Nge2 Bf7 18.Ng3?!

White could have tried to exploit Black's time-consuming maneuvers with 18.d4!?

18...Bg6 19.Be2 Qh2! 20.Bf1 f4!?



21.e×f4?

This gives up control of d4.

21...e×f4

The immediate 21...Nd4! was more accurate.

22.Nge4

22.Nce4! would have allowed White to resist.

22...Nd4 23.Qb1 N×b3+ 24.Kc2 Nd4+ 25.Kc1 N×e4 26.N×e4 B×e4 27.d×e4 Be5 28.B×d4 B×d4 29.R×d4

White sacrifices the exchange out of desperation, in part because he has a bad position and in part because he is also behind on time.

29...c×d4 30.Kb2 Qg1 31.Qd3 Q×f2+ 32.Ka1 Qe1+ 33.Ka2 Qe3 34.Qd1 Q×e4 35.Bd3 Qe6 36.Q×g4?

A unsuccessful pre-move in a hopeless position, as White is about to run out of time.

36...Q×g4 0-1

A large part of the success of bullet openings is due to their surprise value. Just as in normal chess, preparation can make a big difference.

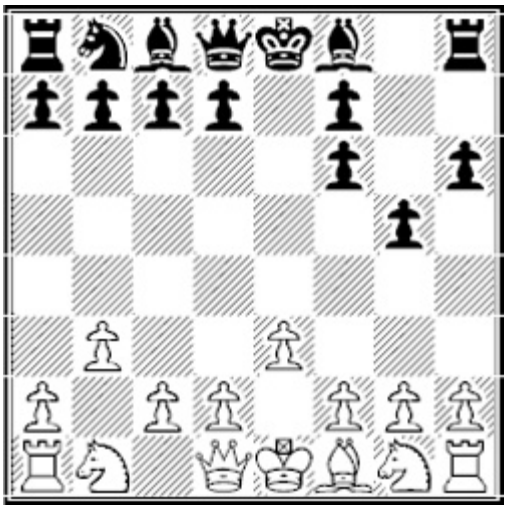
In the next game, it's hard to know if White "prepared" for Black's system, or whether his own pet opening just happened to work well against it.

White (1944) – Black (1882) [A00]

1.e3 h6

A nuance for those who want to take up Black's defense: after 1...g5, 2.h4 is hard to meet.

2.b3 g5 3.Bb2 Nf6 4.B×f6!? e×f6



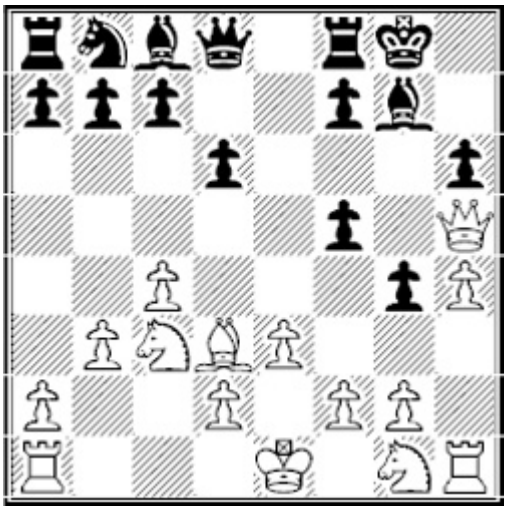
It's anybody's guess what's going on in this position. Black's kingside has been shattered, but such defects are not necessarily fatal even in normal

chess, much less in bullet. The players had each taken four seconds to this point.

5.c4 Bg7 6.Nc3 f5 7.Bd3!? d6 8.Qh5 0-0?! 9.h4

The obvious answer to Black's last move.

9...g4



10.B×f5

There's more to this move than the simple win of a pawn. White's attempt to conquer the light squares leads to a sharp skirmish.

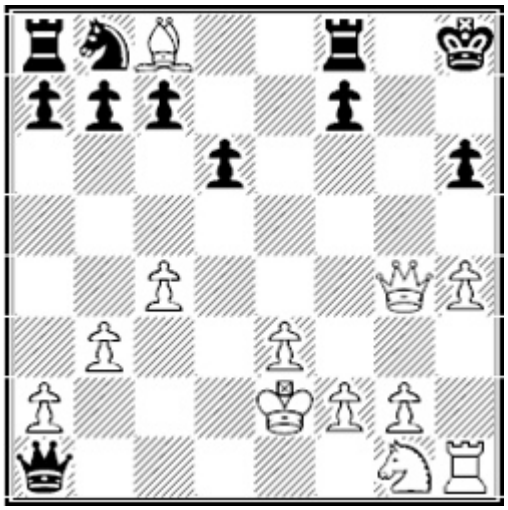
10...B×c3

The only chance for counterplay, but Black faces a difficult choice. Black's g7-bishop is one of his best pieces, so exchanging it involves risks, but he has to do something, as otherwise he is destroyed on the light squares without a fight.

11.d×c3

11.B×c8 (not 11.Q×g4+? Bg7) B×a1 12.B×b7 was also possible, but this involves a sacrifice after 12...Nd7 13.B×a8 Nf6! (13...Q×a8 14.Q×g4+ and 15.Q×d7).

11...Qf6 12.Q×g4+ Kh8 13.B×c8 Q×c3+ 14.Ke2 Q×a1



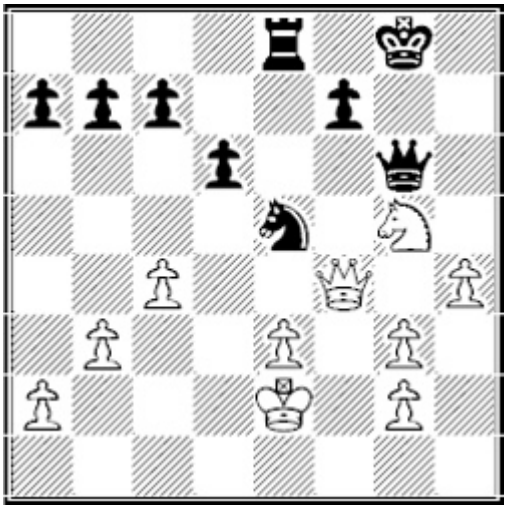
15.Rh3?

Both players have impressively navigated the complications up until now, and after the simple 15.B×b7, White would be on top. Instead White suddenly begins to play for a nonexistent mate.

15...Nc6 16.Nf3? Ra×c8

Suddenly White is down a rook, with little to show for it other than a slight edge in time (38 seconds left, against Black's 32 seconds).

17.Rg3 Rg8 18.Qh5 R×g3 19.Q×h6+ Kg8 20.f×g3 Re8 21.Ng5 Qg7 22.Qh5 Qg6 23.Qg4 Ne5 24.Qf4



24...f6?

With 20 seconds left, Black misses 24...Qc2+, which is immediately decisive (25.Kf1 Qd1+ 26.Kf2 Nd3 mate).

25.Ne4 f5?

Another missed opportunity – White has no reply to 25...Ng4!

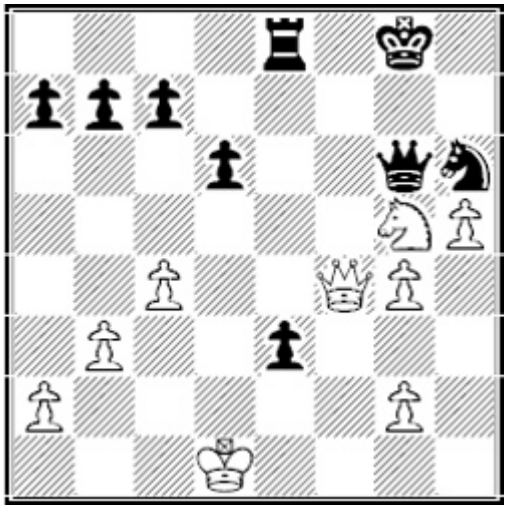
26.Ng5 Ng4 27.e4 Nh6?

The question mark is not so much for the move itself (although 27...Nf6 was stronger), as for the nine seconds Black took on this move, leaving him with only seven seconds for the rest of the game. White's 19-second lead is worth a rook.

28.Kd1 f×e4 29.g4 e3 30.h5 ***(D)***

30...Nf7

With four seconds left, Black panics. 30...Qb1+, which mates in four, might have made the difference.



31.h×g6 Ne5 32.Nf7 N×g6 33.Nh6+ Kg7 34.Nf5+ Kh8 35.Qh6+ 1-0

Black, having missed a number of opportunities, lost on time. White had 18 seconds left.

We have seen a variety of approaches against the ...g5 system. In the next game, White plays as one should against a bullet opening. He doesn't completely ignore Black's kingside pawns, but neither does he obsess on them and try to punish Black. Instead, White simply develops his pieces and builds up in the center.

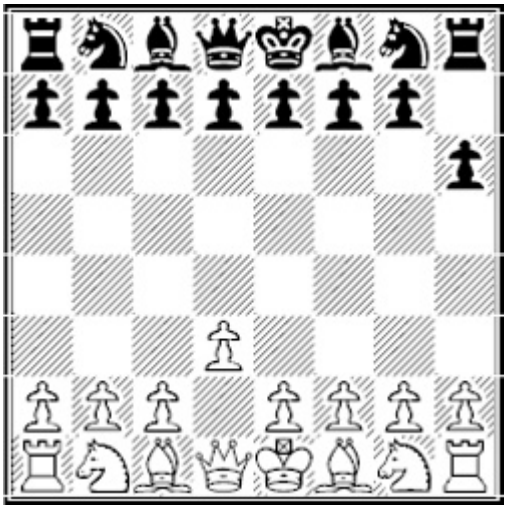
Eventually, when the center opens, Black makes a mistake and White is well positioned to exploit it.

White (2104) – Black (1978) [A00]

1.d3 h6 ***(D)***

2.g3

White continues with his intended scheme of development, which at least avoids falling into the trap of trying to figure out how to refute Black's first move.



2...g5 3.Bg2 Bg7 4.Nc3 d6 5.e4 Nc6 6.f4!?

Either challenging or ignoring Black's set up, depending on how you look at it. White is not afraid of Black's reply.

6...g4 7.Nge2 h5 8.d4

White continues to allow general principles to guide his play, which maintains the temporal balance (both players had slightly over 50 seconds remaining). White reasons, with a fair amount of logic, that the tempos Black has spent on advancing his kingside pawns aren't justified, and therefore simple development will give him the advantage.

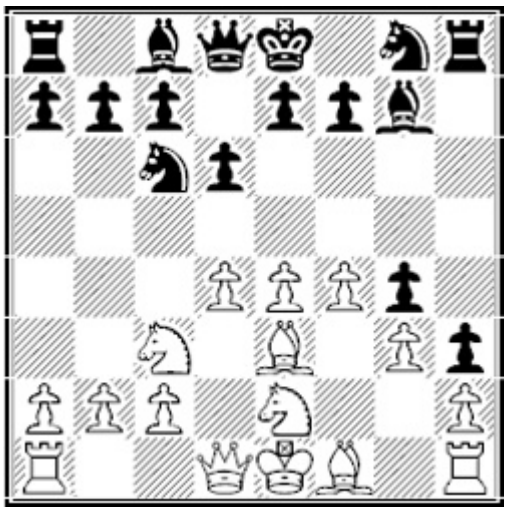
8...h4

Black, of course, must be true to himself.

9.Be3!?

White is also consistent – he continues to just ignore his opponent's moves.

9...h3 10.Bf1



One can be fairly sure that this position has never been seen before by human eyes.

10...e5?!

Too ambitious, but Black may have started to worry that he would just get rolled in the center.

11.d×e5 d×e5 12.Q×d8+ N×d8 13.0-0-0

13.Nd5! was more incisive.

13...c6 14.f×e5

White continues to play with rigorous logic. He just opens the position, so that Black's advanced kingside pawns are meaningless.

14...B×e5 15.Bd4 f6

At this point, each player has 43 seconds remaining.

16.Nf4

Threats start to appear. White's f4-knight eyes g6.

16...Ne7 17.Bc4

More development. Black's response should come as no surprise.

17...b5!? 18.Bb3

White, realizing that his opponent likes to push his pawns, encourages Black's pawn advance on the queenside. Black happily goes along with this idea, so for the moment everyone is singing off the same song sheet.

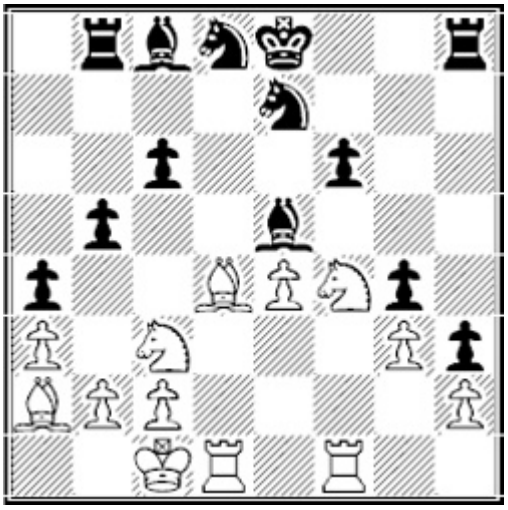
18...a5 19.a3?!

This is a bit too much of a good thing. 19.a4! was better.

19...a4?!

This kills Black's queenside play. Black may have hoped that White would forget to move his b3-bishop, but 19...b4!, with an unclear position, was the way to exploit White's previous play.

20.Ba2 Rb8 21.Rhf1

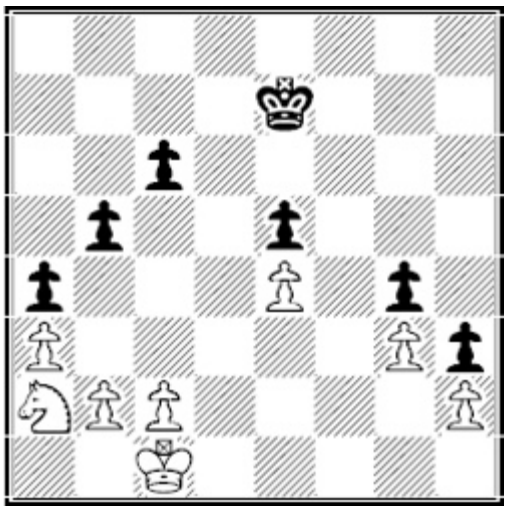


Now everyone has arrived at the party.

21...Rf8?

The losing move. Black has 36 seconds remaining to White's 31 seconds, but that's more than enough time for White to dismantle Black's position.

22.B×e5! f×e5 23.R×d8+ K×d8 24.Ne6+ B×e6 25.R×f8+ Kc7 26.R×b8 B×a2 27.Re8! Kd7 28.R×e7+ K×e7 29.N×a2



After a series of forcing moves, White has come out a clear piece ahead. While White didn't play as precisely as he might have, he achieved a decisive advantage without having to find any particularly difficult moves. All he did was to let his opponent violate the basic principles of good chess, while refusing to become flustered or take too long trying to refute his opponent's suspect play.

29...Kd6 30.Kd2 Kc5 31.Kd3 1-0

King attacks

While the previous systems have some positional justification, at least in certain lines, we now enter the twilight zone of chess openings. The most extreme example of a "bullet opening" is the king attack, which consists not of attacking the opponent's king (which is often a good idea), but rather inducing the opponent to attack your king (which is usually *not* a good idea).

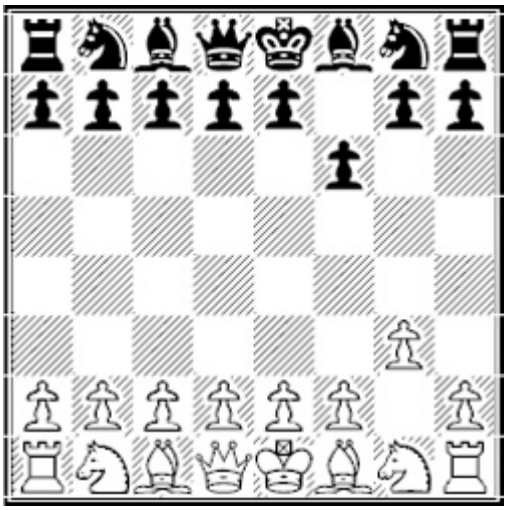
This type of opening begins with a pawn move near your king, then continues with a king march up the board. Of course this is nonsensical, so we have to look more closely to determine what lies behind this opening.

In contrast to the previous systems, the king attack is purely psychological. The hope is that the opponent will be so offended by the insulting opening that he will either attack irrationally (and unsuccessfully!), ruining his position in the process, or run short of time looking for mate. When faced with this opening, it is necessary to exert self-control. In effect, you are playing golf, not tennis, as the last thing you have to worry about is what your opponent is doing. He has ruined his position, and only you can ruin yours.

For some reason the few examples we have of king attacks don’t include any success stories for the players bold enough to employ this opening, but don’t let that fool you. King attacks have claimed any number of victims, and it is a big mistake to underestimate the dangers of the opening, especially on the clock.

White (2378) – Black (2232) [A00]

1.g3 f6



One of the few good things that can be said about 1...f6 is that it is equally strong against any White opening.

2.Bg2 Kf7

The “logical” continuation, if that’s the right term to use. Black continues with his plan to advance his king, in the hope of gaining time and provoking White into a premature attack.

However, in this game White counters his opponent’s idea by ignoring it and just as quickly setting up his own intended formation. Black gets into

trouble because White's plan is intrinsically better, as is fairly obvious from even a cursory look at the position in the next diagram.

3.d3 g6 4.Nc3 Kg7 5.e4 e6 6.f4 Kf7 7.g4 Ke7 8.Nf3 Kd6 9.0-0 Kc6

Black carries out his idea, running his king into the center in front of his pawns.

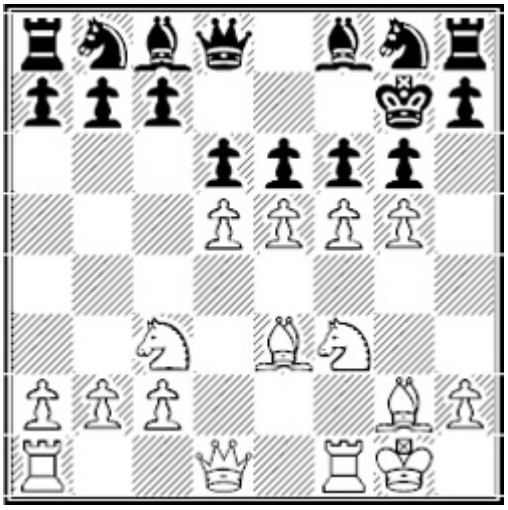
However, Black's plan completely fails because despite everything he has only a one-second lead in time over his opponent. Neither player has used more than five seconds, and White still has quite a few "mindless" moves ahead of him that will improve his position without requiring any time for thought.

When the main (and perhaps only) idea behind an opening is to gain a time advantage, it's as much fun to frustrate your opponent's design by playing quickly as it is to refute the adversary's deep strategic plan in tournament chess. The only real difference is that in bullet you don't get to enjoy it for as long.

10.Be3 d6 11.d4 Kd7 12.d5!

White decides to cross the frontier *en masse*, reasoning that opening the position is without risk and can hardly be bad for him. At this point, White has 54 seconds remaining and Black has 56 seconds.

12...Ke7 13.e5!? Kf7 14.f5! Kg7 15.g5!?



15.d×e6 gives White a decisive advantage, because after 15...f×e5 16.N×e5, Black's d6-pawn is pinned to his queen. But 15.g5!? is not bad either, because it confronts Black with a myriad of choices, and he is almost bound to make a poor one.

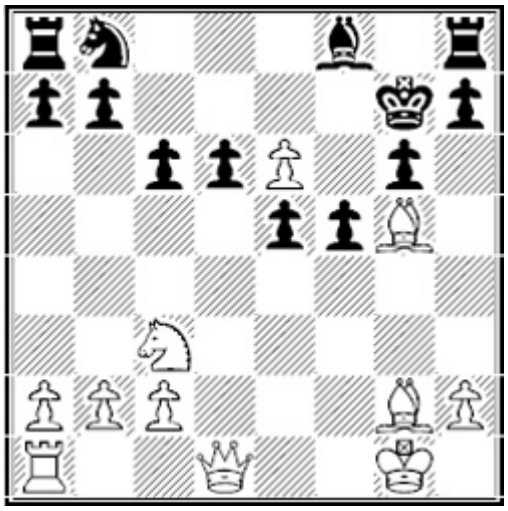
At this point, Black has a seven-second lead in time, but with violence flaring on the board, this may not matter. We can't stress too much that time is important in bullet, but checkmate is even more important.

15...f×e5 16.f6+ N×f6

White reaps the first fruits of his strategy, but not the last, as his initiative now gathers steam.

White's success in this game stems mainly from his blind faith in development. Rather than take time to think, White just played a series of natural moves without worrying unduly about just what they might accomplish. It is often faster to let your opponent worry about that. Then White opened the position...

17.g×f6+ Q×f6 18.Ng5 Qf5 19.R×f5 e×f5 20.Ne6+ B×e6 21.d×e6 c6 22.Bg5!



The key to converting White's advantage quickly. Black's pawn barrier is shattered and White's material advantage will soon be decisive. White has 39 seconds remaining; Black has 47 seconds.

22...h6 23.e7 Kf7 24.Q×d6 h×g5 25.e8Q+ K×e8 26.Q×e5+ Kd7 27.Q×h8 Kd6?

A pre-move error, but now Black's only hope is that White misses so many mates that he runs out of time. But White still has 30 seconds left, so it shouldn't be difficult for him to finish off his opponent.

28.Qf6+ Kc5 29.Q×f8+ Kb6 30.Qd8+ Ka6 31.Q×g5?

A weak move which wastes time. White should continue his attack with 31.b4!, threatening 32.Qa5 mate. After 31...b5 (31...b6 32.Qc8 mate) 32.Qc8+ (32.a4 wins more simply, but not as quickly or nicely) Kb6 33.B×c6! N×c6 34.Nd5 is mate. 31.Bf1+ b5 32.Qc7, followed by 33.a4, also mates quickly. In the interests of kindness and brevity, we won't

comment on all the other mates White misses, other than to append a question mark where White misses mate on the move.

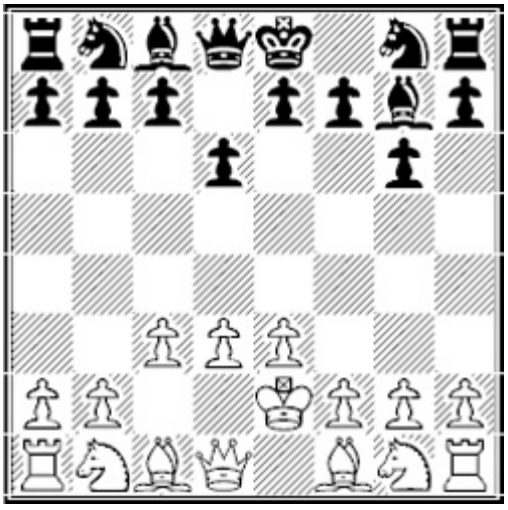
In the end, White checkmated with eight seconds left, so no harm was done, other than to give Black false hopes.

31...Nd7 32.Q×g6 Nb6 33.Q×f5 c5 34.Bf1+ Ka5 35.Nd5? Na4 36.Nc7 Kb6 37.N×a8+ Ka5 38.Qd7 Kb4 39.Nc7? a6 40.Qd3 c4 41.Qd6+ Nc5 42.N×a6+ Kb5 43.N×c5 Kb4 44.Ne4+? Kb5 45.Qc5+ Ka6 46.Nd6 b5 47.Nc8 Kb7 48.Rd1 Ka6 49.Rd6+? Kb7 50.Rd7+ Ka6 51.Qb6 mate 1-0

In the next game, White postpones, but does not entirely avoid, the consequences of his audacious opening.

White (1939) – Black (1912) [A00]

1.e3 g6 2.d3 Bg7 3.c3 d6 4.Ke2

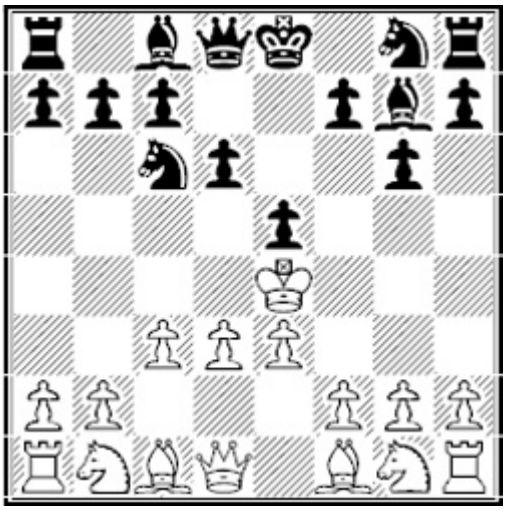


It might be that White intended to play one bullet opening (1.e3, 2.d3, 3.c3, etc., as in the next game), then changed his mind and decided to transpose

into another (a king attack). If so, this might be a rare example of transposing from one bullet opening to another.

But since Black doesn't waste much time paying attention to what White is doing, whatever subtleties White has employed have little effect on the course of the game. A bad position is sometimes just a bad position, and combining two bad openings doesn't really help.

4...Nc6 5.Kf3 e5 6.Ke4



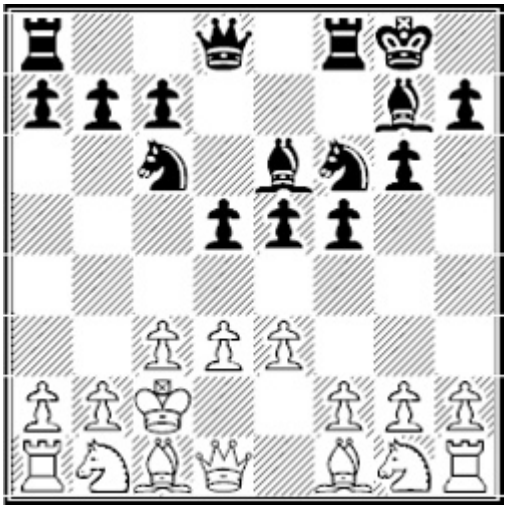
We could have appended question marks to most of White's moves, but he is consistently carrying out his strategy.

6...f5+?

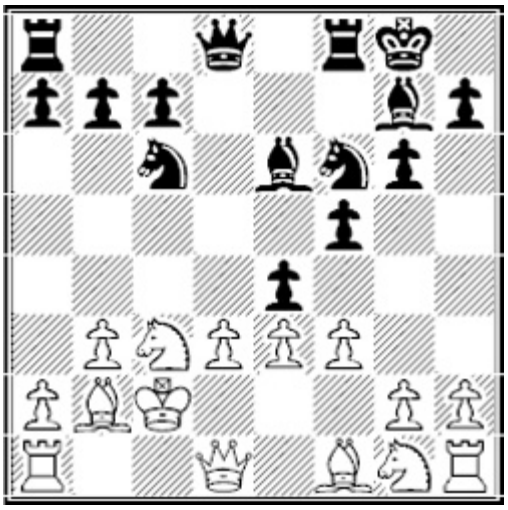
6...Qh4+! would have forced mate, putting an end to White's nonsense. The rule of thumb in such positions might be "look for mate if the opponent's king goes to the fourth rank, but otherwise ignore it." Here Black ignores White's kingwalk altogether.

7.Kf3 Nf6 8.Ke2 0-0 9.Kd2 Be6 10.Kc2 d5 ***(D)***

Even though Black missed (or, perhaps more accurately, didn’t bother to) mate, he hasn’t done badly out of the opening. White has taken seven seconds to get a bad position, while Black has so far used only three seconds. With an inferior position and a time disadvantage, White’s opening has been a complete failure, simply because Black didn’t pay any heed to White’s attention-getting behavior.



11.f3 d4! 12.b3?! d×c3 13.N×c3 e4 14.Bb2?



Missing the threat, which you can hardly afford to do when you play the way White has. Now he is destroyed.

14...e×d3+ 15.B×d3? Nb4+ 16.Kd2?! Q×d3+ 17.Ke1 Q×e3+ 18.Nge2 Nd3+ 19.Kf1 Qf2 mate 0-1

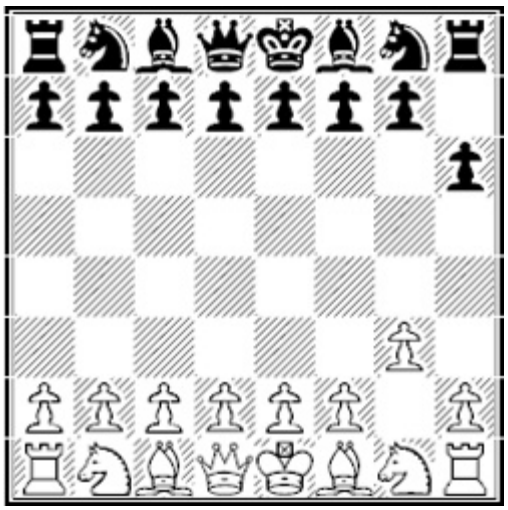
This instructive game took less than 30 seconds from start to finish.

We now leave the king attack, for the moment, to consider some other outlandish bullet openings, which have the same basic idea as the previous ones. One side plays quickly and hopes the opponent overreacts or spends too much time trying to find the most elegant or efficient refutation.

Other strange ideas

White (2136) – Black (2049) [A00]

1.g3 h6



This move only hints at the full majesty of Black’s opening idea, which is soon revealed in all its doubtful glory.

2.Bg2 g6 3.d3 f6

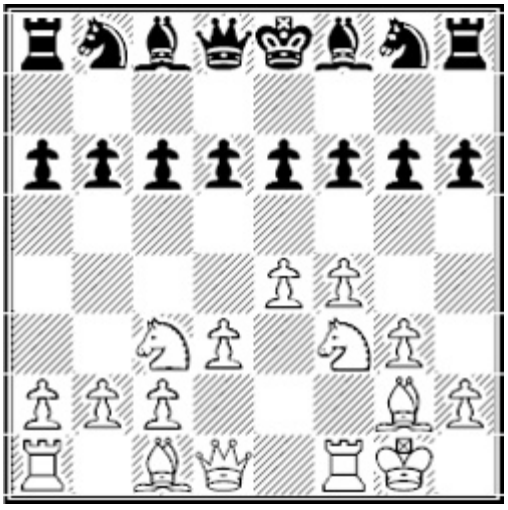
The outlines of Black's opening now start to become clearer. Question marks would be superfluous, as Black's plan of advancing every pawn one square, pre-moving all the way, lies outside the realm of the chess universe.

Because Black is pre-moving, 4.B×b7!? would probably win material, but you can never be sure of such things, and so White plays it cool.

4.e4 e6 5.Nc3 d6 6.f4 c6 7.Nf3 a6

Only Black knows for sure why he moved his a7-pawn, rather than his b7-pawn, at this point. He might have transposed moves inadvertently, might have been trying to avoid running into a prepared line from his opponent, or it might have simply been a mouse slip. Life remains full of mystery.

8.0-0 b6



There you have it – but what next? It is worth noting that while White already has used six seconds, Black has taken less than a second for his first eight moves.

9.a4 Rh7

Of course!

10.Be3 Raa7

Despite Black's silly opening, White must be careful. First of all, he must keep in mind that any advantage he has on the board is, at least to some extent, offset by Black's advantage in time (White has 52 seconds remaining, while Black has 58 seconds left). Secondly, White must avoid falling into two psychological traps: he must not get angry at Black for his opening; and he must not think that Black is going to keep playing badly just because his first ten moves have been suspect.

White can deal with the first issue by refusing to panic – after all, he has plenty of time left. As for the psychological questions, the best approach is to play a few strong, principled moves, while staying alert for opportunities. This also gives White a few moments to clear his head and think clearly about the position, rather than engaging in wishful or emotional thinking, which is exactly what Black hopes he will do.

11.d4

11.a5 may have been stronger, but 11.d4 is sound.

11...Rag7

Played instantly.

12.e5!? Re7

Yet another instantaneous move. Quite apart from what might be happening on the board, Black's overall plan is to keep playing as fast as he can and hope White runs out of time – or blunders trying to keep up. But is bullet chess really that simple?

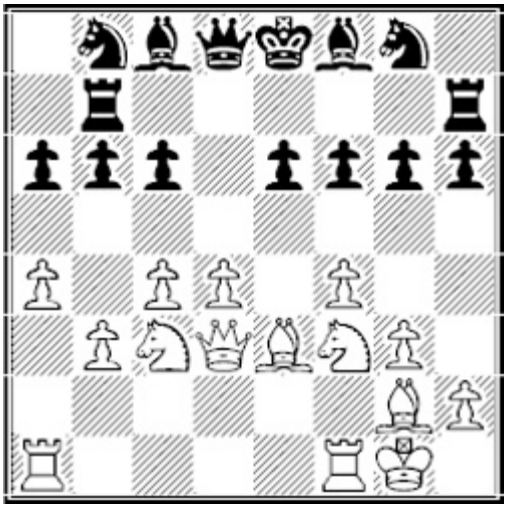
13.e×d6 Q×d6?!

13...Rd7 was probably better.

14.Ne4 Qd8 15.c4 Ref7 16.b3

White continues to try to play quickly, and at this point has 45 seconds left, while Black still has 58 (!!) seconds remaining.

16...Rc7 17.Qd3 Rb7 18.Nc3

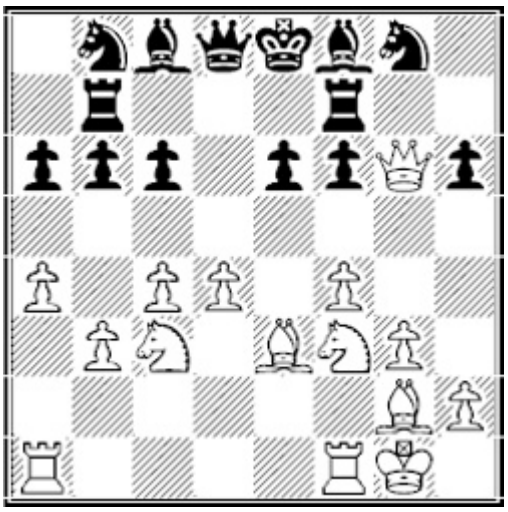


White makes his first actual threat, by unmasking an attack by his queen along the b1-h7 diagonal. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, Black overlooks or ignores this threat, continuing to shuffle his rooks along the second rank.

18...Rhe7?

Black has still used less than three seconds to this point!

19.Q×g6+ Rf7



20.f5?!

Both 20. Ne5!? and 20.Ne4! (20...Ne7? 21.N×f6 mate) were better. 20.Q×g8? was definitely wrong, because White's queen is caught after 20...Rg7.

20...Ke7?

One lesson from this game is that if you're going to play a provocative opening, you have to play well afterwards. After 20...Ne7!, Black's 20-second time advantage might well have told, but he's unable to slow down and think.

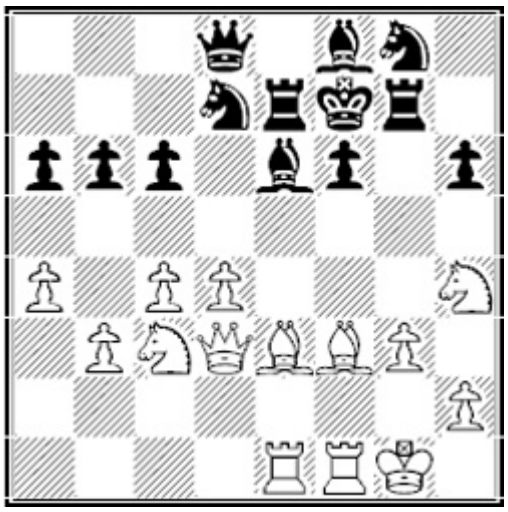
21.f×e6

21.Q×g8 won a piece, but White plays for mate.

21...B×e6 22.Rae1 Rg7 23.Qd3 Kf7 24.Nh4 Re7?

Setting up a self-mate.

25.Bf3! Nd7?



In his unnecessary haste, Black overlooks White's threat. 25...Bg4 was his best chance, but after 26.B×g4 R×g4 27.Qf5, White wins more material.

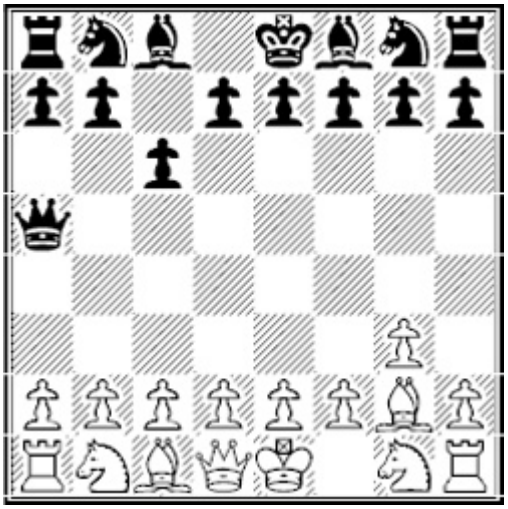
26.Bh5+ Rg6 27.Q×g6 mate 1-0

Black contributed only six seconds to this masterpiece; White used 30 seconds.

In the next game, Black doesn't directly wreck his position, but instead tries to trade tempos in the opening for time on the clock.

White (2000) – Black (1775) [A00]

1.g3 c6 2.Bg2 Qa5



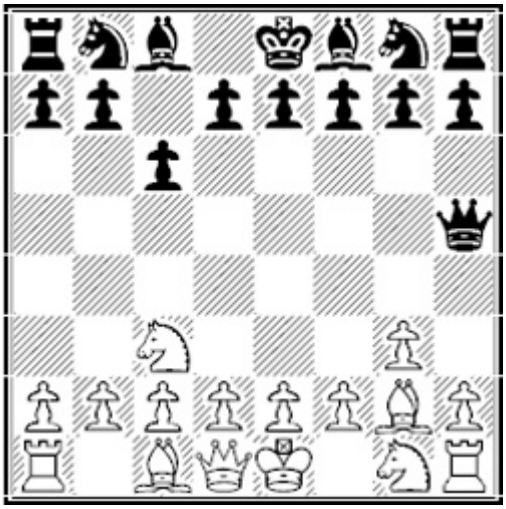
There are two points to this move, which Black played without hesitation as part of a pre-conceived opening. The first is that it pins White's d2-pawn, which costs White a bit of time if he tries to move it (as was in fact the case). The second idea becomes apparent in a moment.

3.Nc3

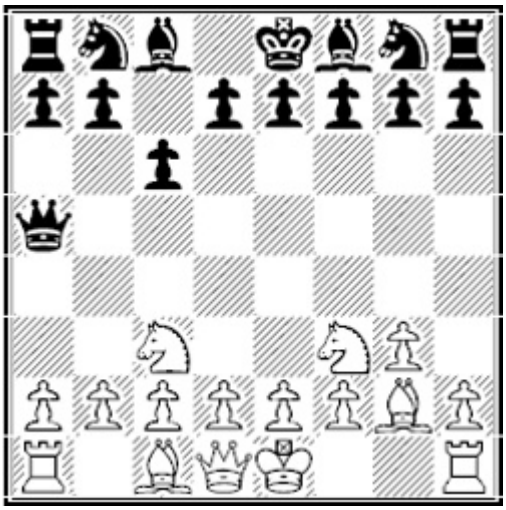
White now has 56 seconds remaining.

3...Qh5 ***(D)***

We again adopt our practice of not appending punctuation marks to moves like this. Is Black planning a kingside attack? Or something else? White continues to develop.

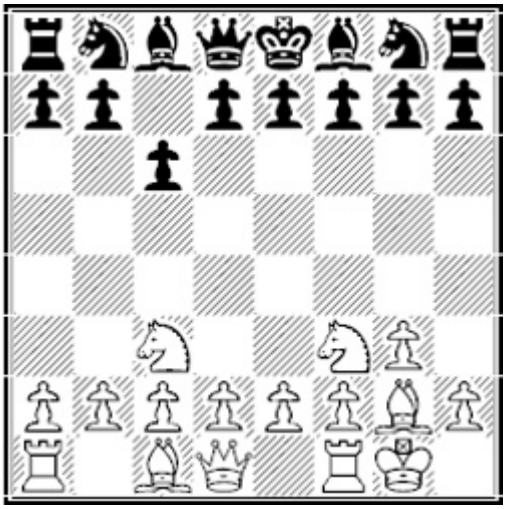


4.Nf3 Qa5



Fooled you! Black is simply trading time on the board for time on the clock.

5.0-0 Qd8



Mission accomplished. Having gained seven seconds on the clock, Black's queen returns to its original square and now Black can try to prove that four or five tempos aren't all that important in a closed position. White's best approach to this type of position is to relax and play normally. After all, it sometimes happens that you don't notice that the game has started and spot your opponent a few seconds, so it's not yet very important that White is behind on time. There is no question of directly refuting Black's strange opening, but White certainly has a pleasant position.

6.d3 d5 7.e4 Nf6 8.e5 Nfd7 9.Re1

White plays calmly, content with a slight advantage. White has 51 seconds remaining; Black 59 seconds.

9...e6 10.Bf4 Be7 11.h4 0-0 12.Ne2 c5 13.c3 Nc6 14.Qd2 b6

Black has now increased his lead in time to ten seconds.

15.h5 d4?

The first sign of nerves from Black. White's kingside pressure seems to be developing more quickly than usual. Why might that be?

16.c4?

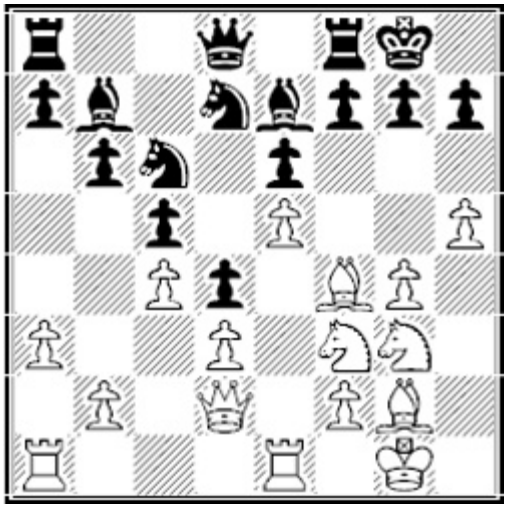
White continues to play quietly in order to minimize the time differential (White now has 45 seconds remaining; Black 55 seconds), but in doing so misses the chance for 16.Nf×d4!, which wins material because of the pin along the h1–a8 diagonal.

Such tactical opportunities are often missed in bullet, but are missed less often by stronger players!

16...Nb4? 17.a3 Nc6 18.g4?!

White misses his second, and final, chance for 18.Nf×d4!, and the game goes down a different path.

18...Bb7 19.Ng3



19...Bh4?

An attempt to confuse White, thereby increasing his time advantage, but Black's queen excursion is dangerous.

20.N×h4 Q×h4 21.Bf3?

21.Bg5! Q×g4 22.Re4!, trapping Black's queen, was the right way to punish Black's 19th move. As we shall see, White has the right idea, but his execution is faulty.

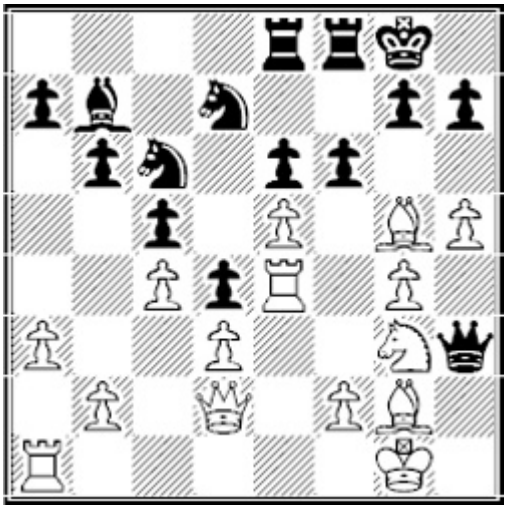
21...Rae8!? 22.Bg5? Qh3?!

The most accurate continuation was 22...Nd×e5!, taking advantage of the exposed position of White's f3-bishop and the possibility of ...Nf3+, forking White's king and queen. Both players overlook this resource.

23.Re4?

23.Bg2! would have forced Black to surrender a piece with 23...Nd×e5 (23...Q×g4 24.Re4 traps Black's queen, as mentioned earlier) 24.B×h3. 23...Nc×e5!? is an interesting alternative, inviting 24.B×h3? Nf3+, when White has to allow a perpetual after 25.Kf1 Nh2+ 26.Kg1 (26.Ke2? Bf3 mate) Nf3+; but the simple 24.B×b7 leaves White with a material advantage. These lines are typical of the possibilities buried in bullet games.

23...f6!? 24.Bg2



It may be difficult to define “irony,” but it is easy to point to examples of it. The fate of Black’s queen, after it carefully returned to its original square on move five, certainly fits the bill. Perhaps even more ironic is the fact that Black is no worse after 24...Nc×e5! 25.B×h3 Nf3+, and given his time advantage he might even be better. But Black misses this possibility, having used up most of his extra time looking for it. More irony...

24...Q×g2+? 25.K×g2 f×g5 26.Q×g5

The blundering is over for the moment.

26...h6 27.Qd2 Na5 28.Rae1 B×e4+ 29.N×e4?! Nb3?! 30.Qe2 Rf7? 31.Kg3?

Missing 31.Nd6.

31...Ref8 32.f3? R×f3+ 33.Q×f3 R×f3+ 34.K×f3 Kf7?

34...N×e5+, forking White’s king and his d3- and g4-pawns, would have left matters very much in doubt.

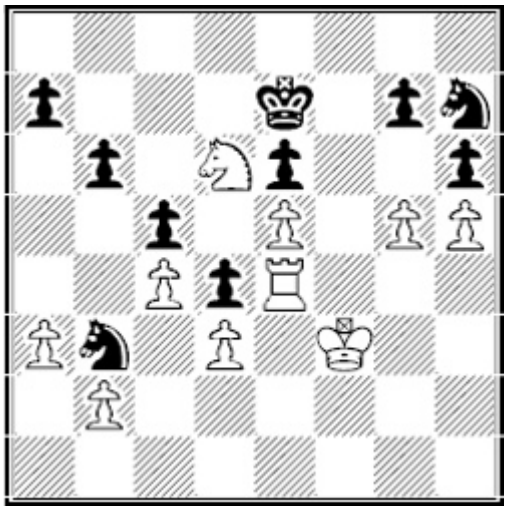
35.Nd6+ Ke7 36.Re4?

36.Nc8+ and 37.N×a7 was better.

36...Nf8!? 37.g5?

37.Rf4, followed by 38.Rf7+, wins.

37...Nh7



Like two punch-drunk fighters in the final rounds of a title bout (although what title is unclear), the players are swinging wildly without making much contact. But now White sets a trap, and luckily for him Black falls into it, since White is down to 15 seconds, while Black has 22 seconds left.

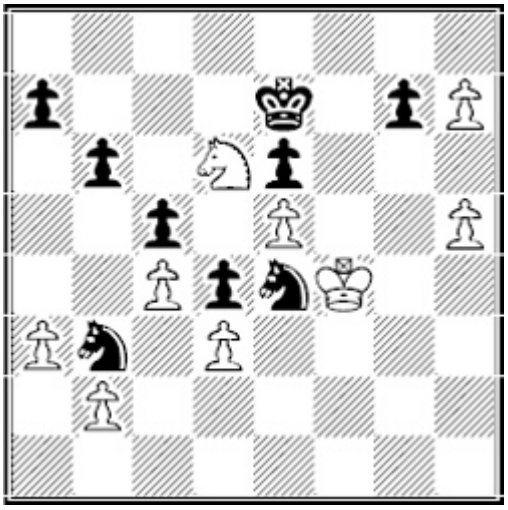
38.g×h6!? Ng5+

Black sees a knight fork and jumps at the opportunity to restore material equality.

39.Kf4 N×e4?

Black should just play 39...g×h6, but he makes a typical bullet mistake by thinking White has to recapture Black's e4-knight, after which he can play 40...g×h6. However, White has a much better move which puts a quick end to this riveting error fest.

40.h7!



White actually saw this (although the greedier 40.h×g7 works too), which is shocking considering how much he missed in the previous 39 moves.

40...Nbd2 41.h8Q Kd7 42.Q×g7+ Kc6 43.Qb7 mate 1-0

White had eight seconds to go.

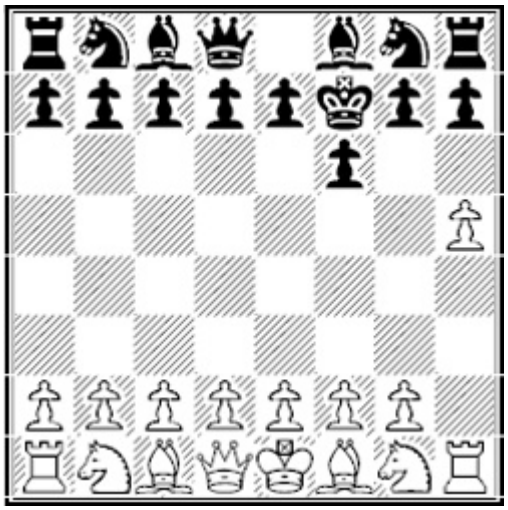
When worlds collide

We've seen what happens when one player plays a bullet opening and the other tries to play "normally," whatever that means in bullet. Players react with varying degrees of violence, outrage or indifference when facing a bullet opening, and the results are almost always entertaining.

But what happens when one bullet opening runs into another? After all, bullet opening practitioners are usually devoted to their unique opening systems and, as a matter of principle, are loath to abandon them, even when faced by something equally outrageous. Of course one of the essential aspects of bullet openings is that they are played at high speed without regard for what the opponent plays, so these worlds may collide without even seeing one another.

White (2258) – Black (2209) [A00]

1.h4 f6 2.h5 Kf7

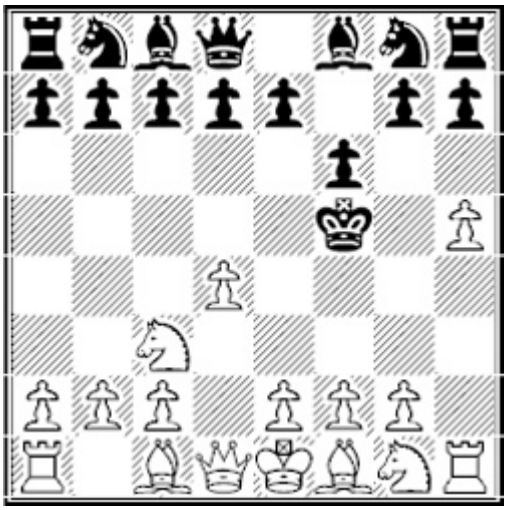


A clash of ideas. Both players (White is our 1.h4 champion) are intent on playing “their opening,” and both are determined to unleash a series of quick moves, regardless of their quality, to disorient the opponent.

In this game, the second consideration might be considered theoretical at best, because it’s doubtful whether either player is really paying attention to what the other is doing.

3.d4 Ke6 4.Nc3 Kf5?

We have not questioned Black’s previous moves, bad as they were, because they fit in with his opening idea, which is to expose his king and hope that White takes too much time trying to mate. This is all well and good, but with his last move Black goes too far.



5.Qd3+?

It was worth spending a few seconds to find 5.d5!, which cuts off the escape route of Black’s king. White then mates by force in several moves, just by developing his pieces. The real tragedy is that 5.d5! makes optimal use of White’s h5-pawn, which prevents Black’s king from escaping via g6. White took less than a second for 5.Qd3+?, forgetting that what happens on the board can matter too.

5...Ke6 6.Qg3

The signature idea of White’s opening, but it leaves him with only a small advantage.

6...Kf7 7.Bf4 d6 8.0–0–0 e6 9.e4 a6 10.Bc4 c6 11.d5 c×d5 12.e×d5 e5 13.Be3 Bd7 14.f4 b5 15.Bd3 Ke8?! 16.Nf3

Missing 16.f×e5 f×e5 17.Bg6+! h×g6 18.Q×g6+ Ke7 19.Bg5+ Nf6 20.Rf1, and White breaks through on f6.

16...Ne7 17.h6 g6 18.f×e5 f×e5 19.Ng5

19.N×e5! was also good.

19...Bf5 20.Rhf1?

Time is about equal: White has 45 seconds left and Black has 46 seconds. Now Black has a chance to get back in the game.

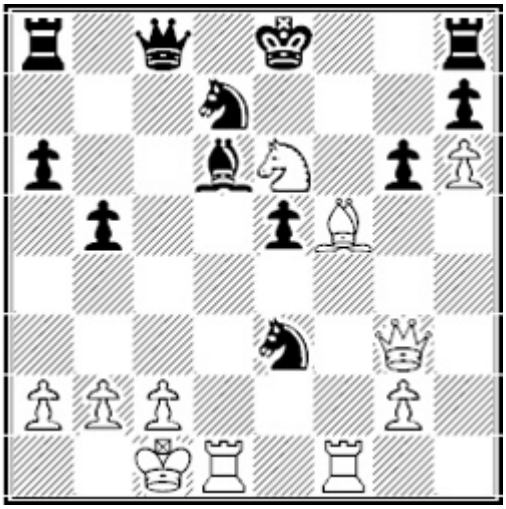
20...Nd7?

After 20...B×h6!, the position would be objectively equal, and psychologically Black might well have an advantage, as White's inevitable frustration at having let his opponent's king escape would be a major plus for Black.

21.Ne6 Qc8 22.Ne4 N×d5?! 23.N×d6+

23.N×f8 was even more convincing.

23...B×d6 24.B×f5 N×e3



25.Q×e3?

Disappointingly, with 35 seconds left, White misses another mate with 25.B×g6+ Ke7 (25...h×g6 26.Q×g6+ Ke7 27.Qf7 mate) 26.Rf7+ K×e6 27.Qh3+ Nf5 28.Q×f5 mate.

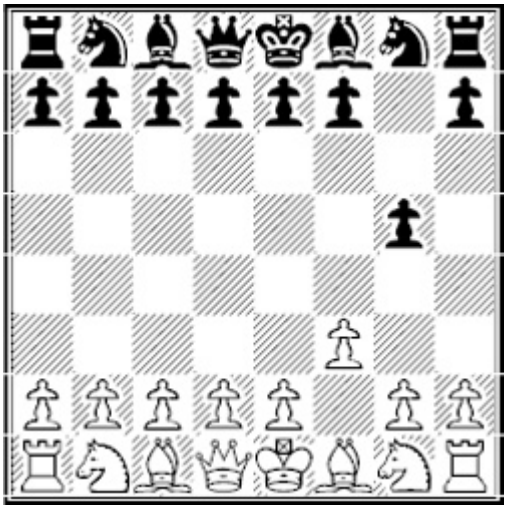
25...g×f5 26.R×d6 Ke7 27.Rfd1 Nf6 28.Q×e5 Kf7 29.Ng5+ 1-0

All's well that ends well.

It really isn't surprising that in bullet opening battles, king attacks often come out second best. In our next example, a king attacker runs into a different bullet opening and is convincingly dismantled in a grisly game. What follows has scenes of violence and is not recommended for sensitive readers.

White (1949) – Black (1922) [A00]

1.f3 g5



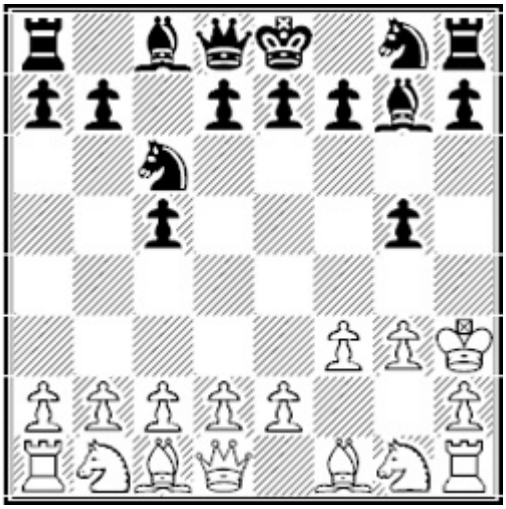
Black, we must reveal, is none other than the 1...g5 champion whose games are featured earlier in this chapter.

2.Kf2

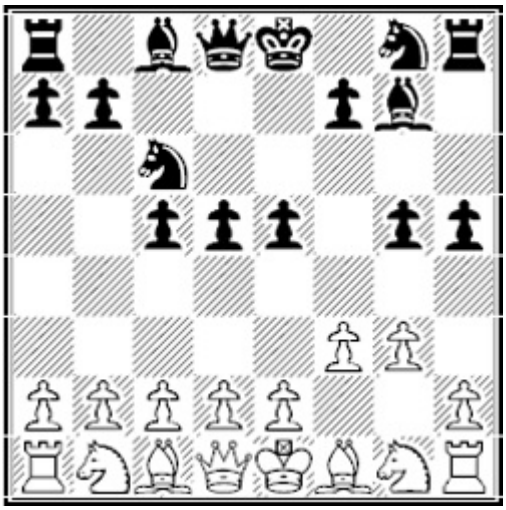
White, for his part, sees no reason to vary from his “normal” opening. After all, how could it be worse against 1...g5 than against something like 1...e5 or 1...d5? But Black is not a player to be easily thrown off his game!

2...Bg7 3.g3 c5 4.Kg2 Nc6 5.Kh3 ***(D)***

Anything worth doing is worth doing to excess...



5...d5+ 6.Kg2 e5 7.Kf2 h5 8.Ke1



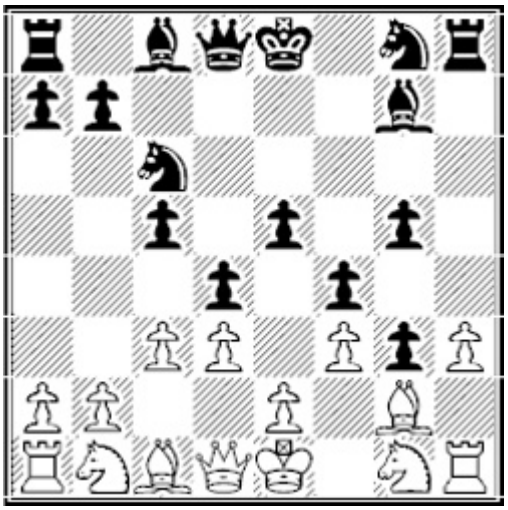
White has 57 seconds left, and Black 52 seconds, but otherwise White's kingwalk has accomplished less than nothing – Black is in his element.

8...h4 9.d3?

White overlooks a simple pin down the h-file, proving that haste can indeed make waste. White's position very quickly takes on a striking resemblance to a garbage dump.

9...h×g3 10.h3 f5 11.Bg2 f4 12.c3 d4 ***(D)***

In this stunningly awful position, White decides to go with what got him there, and starts a kingwalk to the other side of the board. However, things are no better over there.



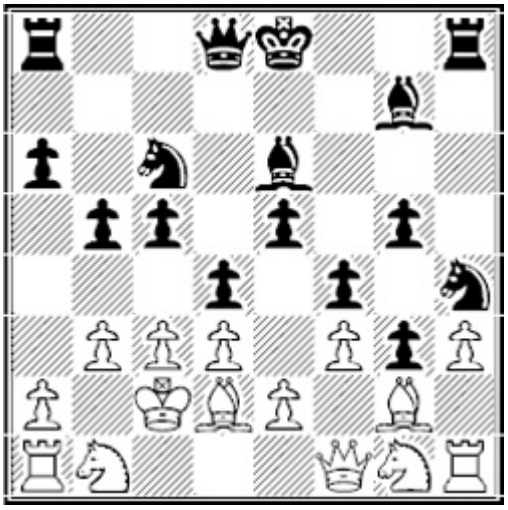
13.Kd2 Nge7 14.Kc2 Nf5

White now has a 10-second lead in time (55 seconds to 45 seconds left), but it is easy for Black to find moves in this sort of position.

15.Na3 Nh4 16.Qf1 Be6 17.b3 a6

Of course 17...d×c3 wins, but Black must have been enjoying himself. And you never know when a game will be published and proclaimed a masterpiece of constriction.

18.Bd2 b5 19.Nb1



White is now 17 seconds ahead on time, giving him that much longer to enjoy his position.

19...d×c3 20.B×c3 Nd4+ 21.B×d4 c×d4

21...Q×d4 22.Nc3 e4! was even gorier.

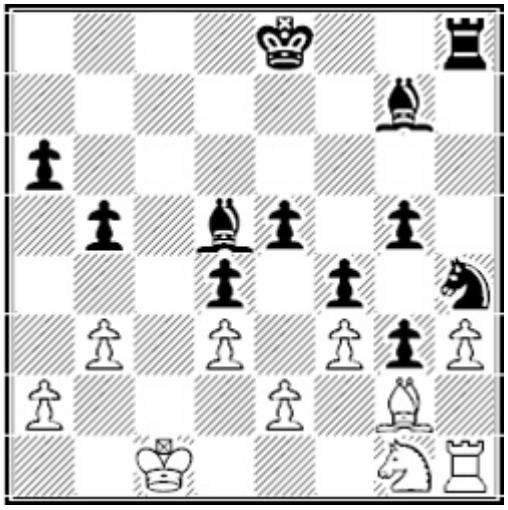
22.Nd2 Rc8+ 23.Kd1 Qc7 24.Ne4

While one bad piece may wreck a position (so one theory goes), one good piece can rarely save a bad position. Black could now force mate with 24...Bf8!, bringing his dark-squared bishop to b4, but Black plays systematically to eliminate White's only decent piece.

24...Bd5 25.Kd2 B×e4 26.Rc1 Q×c1+

Good enough, but 26...Qa5+ was a faster way to win.

27.Q×c1 R×c1 28.K×c1 Bd5



White’s position is truly horrible, but the really bad news for White is Black has almost caught up on time.

29.e4 d×e3 30.Bf1 g2 31.B×g2 N×g2 32.Rh2 Nh4 33.Ne2 Nf5 34.Rg2 Bf6 35.Rg1 R×h3

It’s really not getting any better.

36.Nc3 B×f3 37.Kb2 Rh2+ 38.Ka3 e4 39.d×e4 B×c3 40.e×f5 b4+ 41.Ka4 R×a2 mate 0-1

Black had four seconds left when this game mercifully ended.

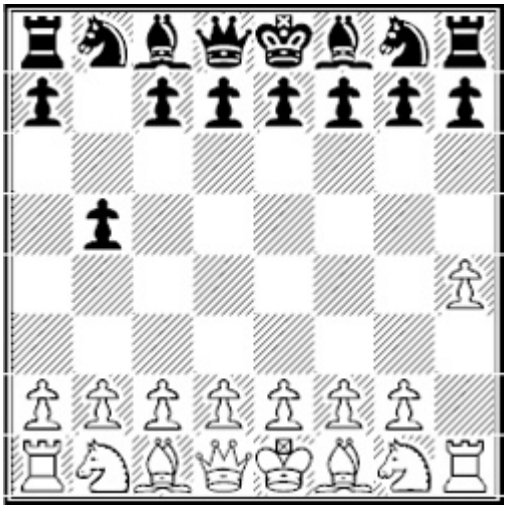
The final game of this chapter, which we suspect was the result of pre-game preparation, is also included for its amusement value. It illustrates that sometimes the laws of normal chess appear not to apply in bullet.

White (2032) – Black (1868) [A00]

1.h4!?

No, this game wasn’t played by the champion of 1.h4 featured earlier in this chapter. But it *was* played against the 1...g5 champion, so White steals a march on his opponent by preventing 1...g5. Not to be outdone, Black naturally replies...

1...b5



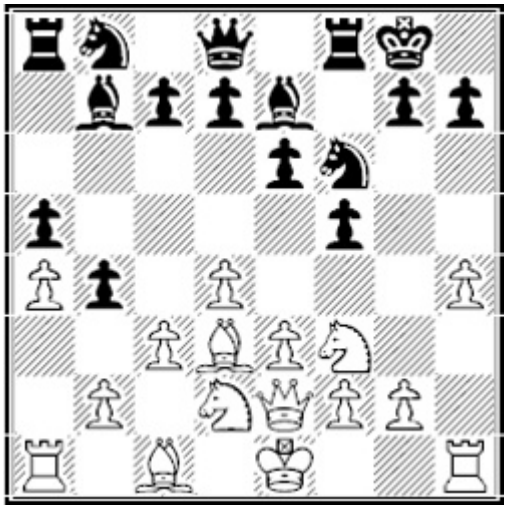
Black took two seconds for this move, which just isn’t quite the same as 1...g5, is it? The psychological battle has been won by White.

2.a4!?

What else? One basic bullet principle is that it is almost always good to make an attacking move, because then the opponent has to respond, which uses up time.

In any case, whenever you can start a game by moving both your rook pawns on the first two moves, you should.

2...b4 3.e3 a5 4.d4 Bb7 5.Nf3 e6 6.c3 f5 7.Bd3 Nf6 8.Nbd2 Be7 9.Qe2 0-0



Apart from the first two or three moves, play has been quite normal and Black has a comfortable position, mainly because White's h-pawn is at h4. Can White make it work?

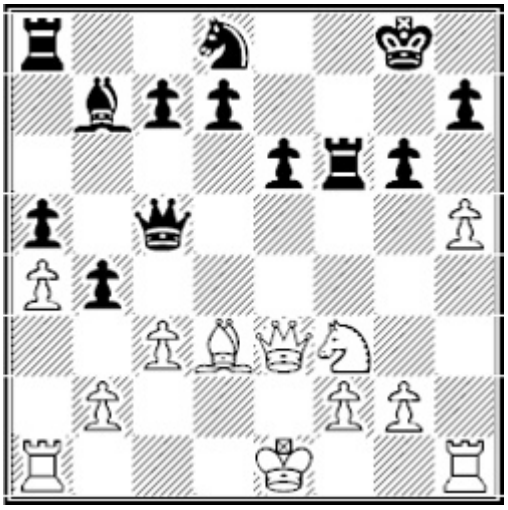
10.e4 f×e4 11.N×e4 Nc6 12.Nc5?! B×c5 13.d×c5 Qe7 14.Bg5 Q×c5 15.B×f6 R×f6 16.Qe4 g6

16...Rh6 was safer.

17.h5

White's h4-pawn leaps into action.

17...Nd8?! 18.Qe3



A surprising offer to trade queens, since 18...Q×e3 leaves Black with a clear advantage. But White may have reasoned that his lead in time (42 seconds remaining, against Black's 29 seconds) gave him better chances in a simplified position. The offer to exchange queens turns out to be more surprising than anyone would have thought. For several moves, neither player notices that Black's queen is hanging!

18...B×f3? 19.g×f3? Nf7? 20.h×g6? h×g6? 21.f4? Kg7? 22.Q×c5!

White sees it, with 39 seconds left! Black has 22 seconds remaining.

22...d6 23.Q×c7 1-0

Chapter 9

The Initiative

It used to be that chess players had style – world champion Max Euwe even wrote a history of chess entitled *The Development of Chess Style.* Some players maneuvered quietly; some sacrificed speculatively; some greedily went after material; and some gave up material for deep positional reasons which mystified their peers. Those days are pretty much gone.

Today, at the highest levels of grandmaster chess, many openings are simply considered to be unplayable – or at most have possible surprise value. The lessons of the past have been learned too well, and the distinctive styles that distinguished the top players of the past have been mastered and homogenized into what is euphemistically termed “modern chess.” Anderssen’s optimistic combinations would be refuted; Steinitz’s tortured maneuvering would land him at the bottom of the crosstable; Capablanca’s lazy intuition would result only in draws; Alekhine’s opening novelties would all be known. Computers and the information world have leveled the playing field, and teenage grandmasters are the norm (if you will pardon the awful pun).

While the movements to reform chess by adding pieces and changing other rules grow, bullet chess remains one of the last preserves of individualism in chess. We have looked at “bullet openings” which could never hope to see the light of day in normal chess, and the same standard applies to the middle game. In bullet the test is not “is it sound?” but rather “will it work?” Fritz is still entitled to its opinion, and it is often interesting to see what the “objective truth” might be in a given bullet position, but the

human element still dominates. With only one minute for the game, psychology and human responses are paramount and surprise, bluff and blunders characterize bullet games.

Detractors of bullet (those who can’t think fast enough to play it) point to the high frequency of mistakes in bullet and compare it unfavorably to classical chess. We agree with this analysis, provided you change “unfavorably” to “favorably.” It is precisely the greater likelihood of mistakes in bullet that make it a more interesting and enjoyable form of chess than the tournament games of today, with their emphasis on the memorization of computer-approved openings, all-around style and technique.

In bullet, a player can express his or her individuality and nowhere is this more possible than in the middlegame. In bullet, you can play like whatever chess hero you choose (perhaps “try to play like...” would be more accurate). Since success in bullet is often associated with dragging your opponent into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory, excess is often a virtue rather than a vice. The options in bullet are much more varied than in normal chess, but that doesn’t answer the question as to what approach you should adopt.

When discussing openings, we mentioned two styles: the “Tal” style of attacking and making threats, and the “Kortschnoi” style of accepting sacrifices and defending. Several other styles that bullet players can employ come to mind: the “Capablanca” style of playing simple, classical moves; the “Petrosian” style of patient maneuvering and constriction; and the “Suttles” style of trying to freak out your opponent.

All of these approaches have the same goal: to get the opponent to make a mistake. This can happen immediately, or the opponent can take so much time avoiding a mistake that he runs short of time and makes a mistake later on. It is important to keep this in mind – the fact that your opponent avoids present dangers doesn't mean your strategy is not succeeding. Despite the position on the board, you may be making tangible progress on the clock or intangible progress in your opponent's mind. In bullet, as opposed to normal chess, these other considerations are very real and can be more important than the position on the board.

Just which style suits any particular player is for that player to determine. There is no "proper" way to play bullet (this might be the understatement of the year). In fact, as one of the last refuges of free chess spirits, the very idea of bullet orthodoxy is alien to bullet players. In bullet, anything goes, and the worst that can happen is that you lose.

That said, there are a few basic principles that recur in bullet games. In this chapter we consider what is arguably the most important: the initiative.

The key to success in bullet is to put your opponent under constant pressure, which might be as good a definition of the "initiative" in chess as you will get. The most direct way of doing so is by making tactical threats against your opponent's king. After all, checkmate ends the game in bullet just as in normal chess, so threats against the enemy king are difficult to ignore.

In this chapter, we will look at a number of games which demonstrate the "Tal" style, in which attacking the enemy king proves to be the decisive factor, outweighing more esoteric considerations like pawn structure, space, material, or even time on the clock. Checkmate ends the game!

The initiative

In the first example, Black makes a relatively modest sacrifice in order to blast his opponent's king into the center of the board. The importance of the initiative is readily apparent, as White quickly finds himself with a hopeless defensive task.

White (2051) – Black (1953) [B06]

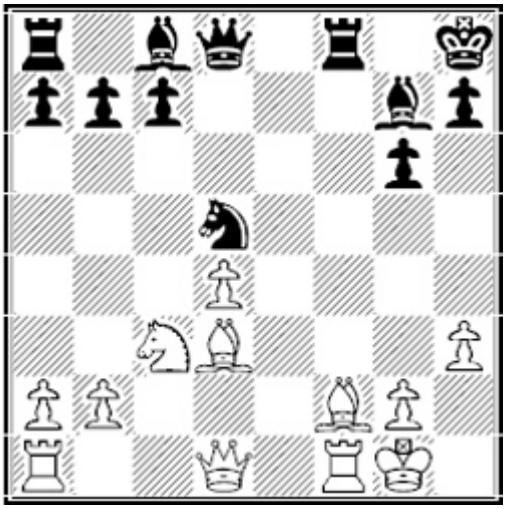
1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.c3 d6 4.Bd3 e5 5.Ne2 Nc6 6.Be3 f5 7.f3 Nf6 8.0-0 0-0 9.h3 f×e4 10.f×e4 d5 11.e×d5 N×d5 12.Bf2?!

White's treatment of the opening left much to be desired, and Black has equalized easily. But now White is playing with fire. 12.R×f8+ was much safer.

12...e×d4 13.N×d4 N×d4 14.c×d4 Kh8

Black unnecessarily prepares for his next move. But Black didn't spend any time on 14...Kh8, and such precautionary moves are often useful, so at most 14...Kh8 might have resulted in a lost opportunity.

15.Nc3



15...R×f2!

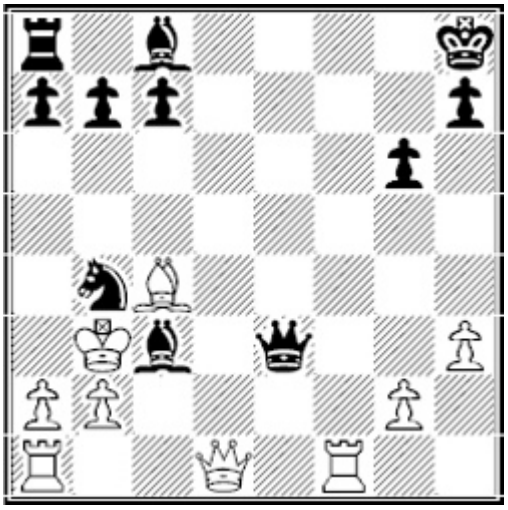
An obvious but instructive sacrifice, designed to seize the initiative and expose White's king to attack. In one sense, this is a poor example for this book, because the sacrifice is actually sound, having a solid positional basis, but the ensuing play conveys the idea of the initiative clearly.

At this point, both players have around 35 seconds left, so time is not yet a significant factor. What happens on the board is likely to decide the outcome of the game.

16.K×f2 B×d4+ 17.Ke2 B×c3

Winning a piece, because the knight fork after 18.b×c3 N×c3+ costs White his queen, but 17...Qe7+! was even better.

18.Bc4 Qe7+ 19.Kd3 Qe3+ 20.Kc2 Nb4+ 21.Kb3



White's eight-second lead (24 seconds to 16 seconds) doesn't help him escape, because Black finds the strongest continuation and forces mate.

21...Bd2+! 22.Ka4 Bd7+ 23.Bb5 B×b5+ 24.K×b5 a6+ 25.Ka4 b5+ 26.Ka5 Qb6 mate 0-1

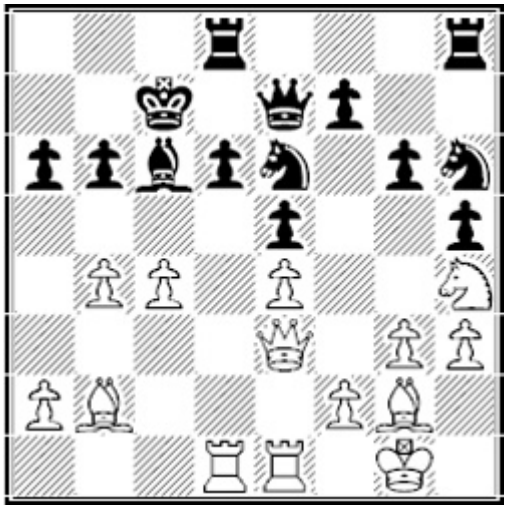
With seven seconds to spare.

The next example is more subtle (there was nothing subtle about the previous game!), as White appears to create "something out of nothing" with a single pawn move which changes the entire course of the game.

It is worth stressing that when you have a choice of plans in bullet, starting an attack against the opposing king is often the best idea.

White (2927) – Black (2352) [A00]

1.d3 b6 2.e3 Bb7 3.Nd2 e6 4.Ngf3 Nf6 5.g3 d5 6.Bg2 Nbd7 7.0-0 Bd6 8.Re1 a6 9.b3 Qe7 10.Bb2 h5 11.e4 d×e4 12.d×e4 e5 13.Nh4 g6 14.Nc4 0-0-0 15.N×d6+ c×d6 16.Qd2 Ng4 17.h3 Nh6 18.c4 Nc5 19.Rad1 Ne6 20.b4 Kc7 21.Qe3 Bc6



22.a4!

At this point both sides have 47 seconds left, so time is not yet a crucial factor. White is clearly better, but there is no simple win. The key idea behind 22.a4! is to seize the initiative by threatening both 23.a5 and 25.b5, which in turn forces Black to use time to try to find the best defence.

That said, 22.a4! doesn't look so powerful that one would expect the game to end in only a few moves (and in, literally, a few seconds).

22...B×a4

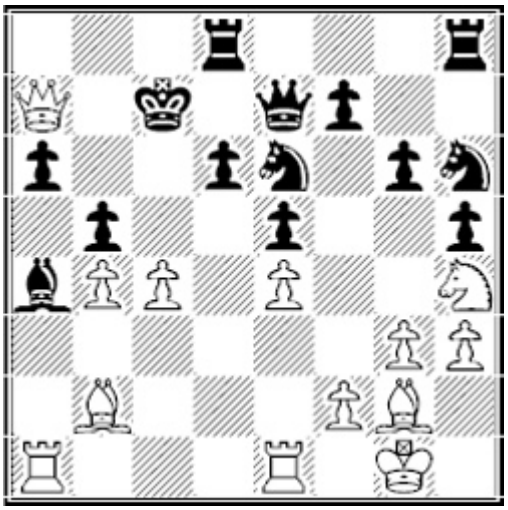
Black used only one second on 22...B×a4. To his credit, it is probably the best chance.

23.Ra1 b5?

Black again used only one second for 23...b5? Had he spent a bit more time, he would have found the better defense 23...Qe8, although White would still be on top.

Black’s oversight is immediately and drastically punished.

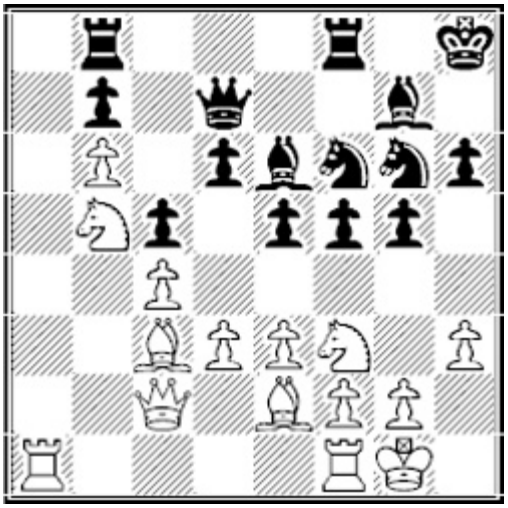
24.Qa7+! 1-0



An unexpected *dénouement*. Black loses his queen.

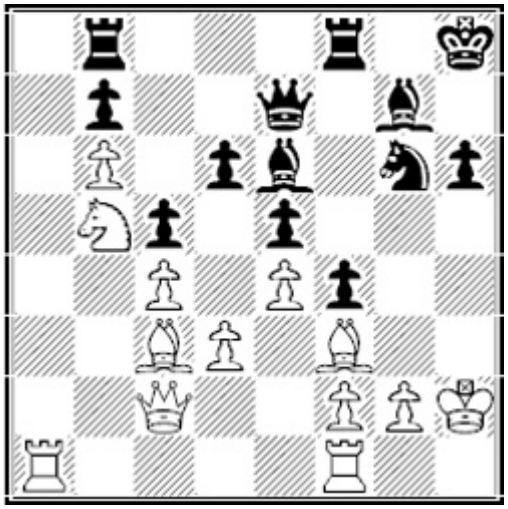
In the next example, Black wins the fight for the initiative because his target is his opponent’s king.

White (2087) – Black (2224) [A00]



A typical position in which each player has ignored what his opponent is doing. Objectively the position is roughly equal; and perhaps practically as well. White has an 11-second lead in time (46 seconds to 35 seconds), but Black has a kingside attack brewing, which he now starts by advancing his g5-pawn.

21...g4 22.h×g4 N×g4 23.Nh2 N×h2 24.K×h2 f4 25.e4?! Qe7 26.Bf3?!

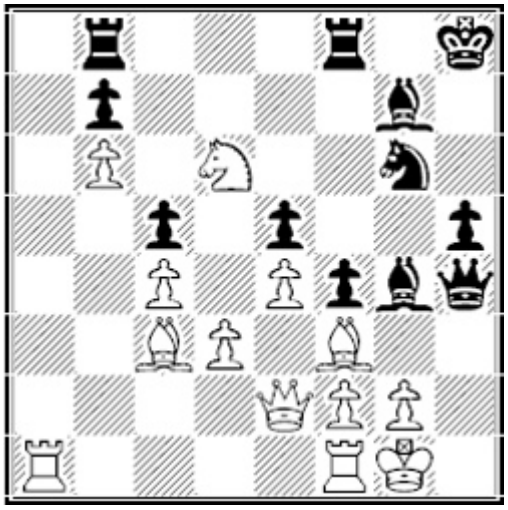


It is no secret that it is harder to defend than to attack, especially in bullet. 26.f3 was safer.

26...Qh4+ 27.Kg1 Bg4?

27...Qg5! was the right way to continue the attack.

28.Qe2 h5 29.N×d6

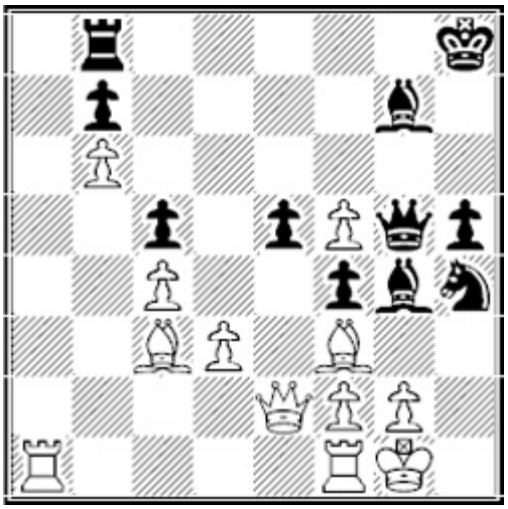


Thanks to his mistake on move 27, Black now stands worse, and with the arrival of White's knight on d6, Black's central position begins to crumble. The time situation also hasn't improved for Black. Confronted with an impending crisis, Black turns all his efforts to a single plan – to dislodge White's f3-bishop and then mate on g2.

29...Qg5 30.Nf5 R×f5!?

This sacrifice is Black's best practical chance.

31.e×f5 Nh4



32.B×e5?

The correct defense was 32.B×g4 h×g4 33.Rfd1!, and White's king escapes.

32...B×f3

32...N×f3+ also won.

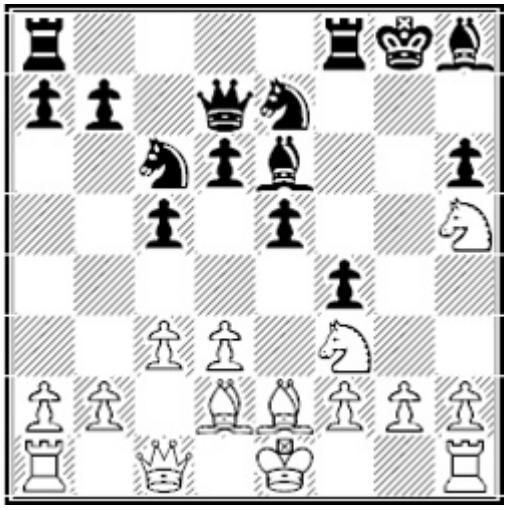
33.B×g7+ Kh7 0-1

White resigned. There was nothing wrong with 33...Q×g7, except that 33...Kh7 is cooler.

In the next example, White's king gets trapped in the center and his efforts to launch a counterattack from an inferior position only make things worse.

Bluffing is an important part of bullet, but the realities of the position on the board can also be important. The concept of the initiative is real, and it is usually not enough to just act like you are calling the shots. You can either earn the initiative or have your opponent give it to you for free, but you can't really just claim the initiative and hope.

White (2151) – Black (1997) [A00]

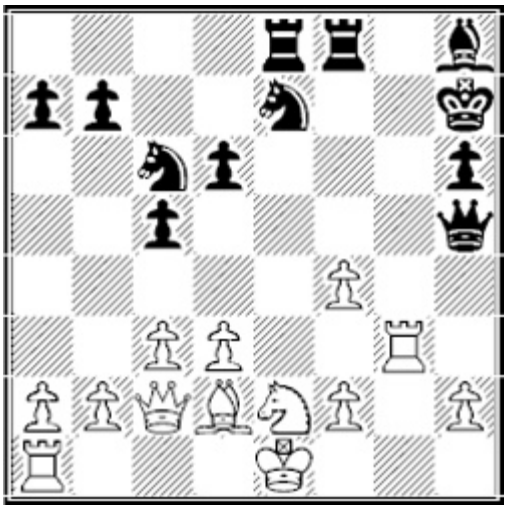


In this double-edged position, Black stands better, but White has 53 seconds left and Black has 47 seconds. Now White forgets about, or perhaps more accurately ignores, his h5-knight and plays to open lines for an attack. He succeeds, except the lines opened help Black's attack.

16.g3? Bg4 17.Ng1 B×e2 18.N×e2 Qg4 19.Nh×f4

White has nothing better, but he hopes to make a virtue out of necessity and open the g-file.

19...e×f4 20.g×f4 Kh7 21.Qc2 Rae8 22.Rg1 Qf3 23.Rg3 Qh5



24.d4+

White has been playing for this discovered check, but 24...Nf5! is such a strong move that Black played it without even noticing he was in check...

24...Nf5! 25.f3?!

Not the best way to defend against the mate threat on e2, but with each player having about 30 seconds remaining, White's position was hopeless.

25...Q×h2 26.Be3 R×e3 27.Kf1 R×e2 28.Q×e2 N×g3+ 29.Ke1 Q×e2 mate 0-1

The initiative and material

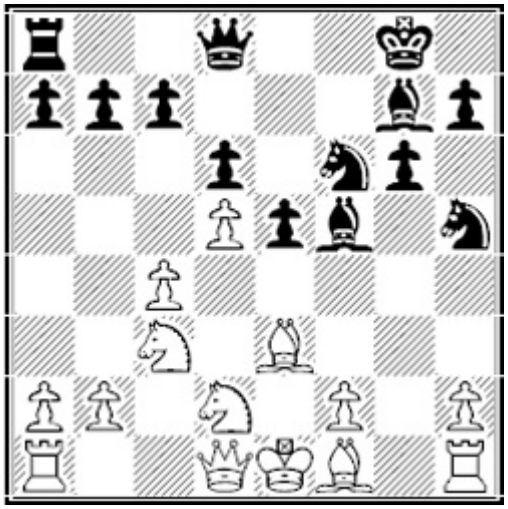
Sacrifices to gain the initiative are commonplace and there are many such examples in this book. In the next two games, the situation is a bit different. Black loses material early in the game, but manages to obtain compensation by consistently playing for the attack. In bullet, you should never resign merely because of material loss!

White (2300) – Black (2960) [A41]

1.d4 d6 2.Nf3 Nd7 3.c4 Ngf6 4.Nc3 g6 5.e4 Bg7 6.Be3 0-0 7.Be2 e5 8.d5 Nh5 9.Nd2 Nf4 10.Bf1 f5 11.g3 Nh5 12.e×f5 R×f5? 13.g4!

White has played the opening flawlessly and now wins material. Black has to choose between giving up his knight or his rook. In bullet chess, knights tend to be more useful than rooks except in positions with multiple open files. As that is not the case here, Black decides to chuck his rook and attempt to create some threats in order to gain the initiative.

13...Ndf6 14.g×f5 B×f5



15.Be2 Nf4

Attempting to avoid further simplification.

16.B×f4 e×f4 17.Qb3 Nd7

Already, Black has gotten more play than he could have hoped for after giving away his rook. The two open diagonals, as well as the optimal square c5 for his knight, give Black hope for a miracle.

18.0-0-0 Nc5 19.Qa3 a5 20.Rhe1?

A very natural-looking move, but it allows Black a great shot which will turn the position upside down.

20...f3! 21.N×f3 Bh6+ 22.Nd2

22.Rd2 would have been better as it would have released the pressure as well as giving White's king a very necessary escape square on d1.

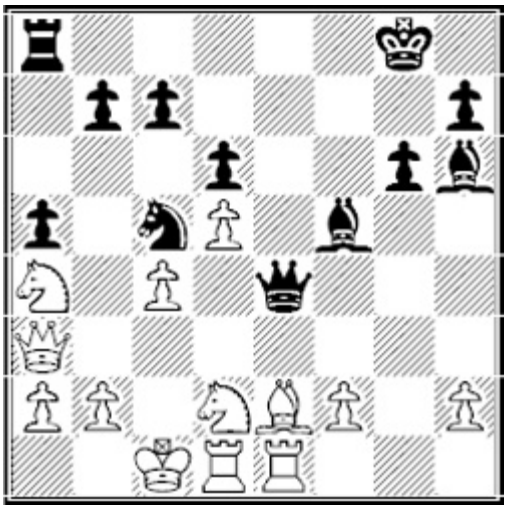
22...Qh4

White has 39 seconds remaining, while Black has 44 seconds left. Despite this small time disadvantage, White's real problem is that he has to come up with a plan to untangle his pieces. This is rather difficult to do without using critical extra seconds, since Black can create tactical threats on nearly every move.

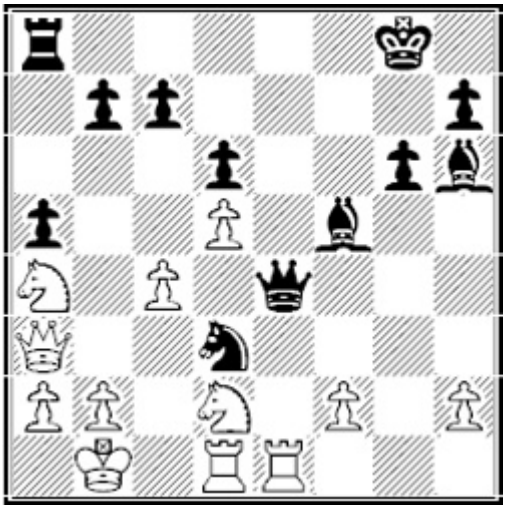
23.Na4?

This move was made after a five-second think. 23.Na4? seems logical, as White wants to trade off knights, but unfortunately it allows Black a tactical shot which wins on the spot.

23...Qe4!



24.Bd3 N×d3+ 25.Kb1



25...Qd4?

25...N×e1+! wins immediately. Now White has a surprising resource.

26.Re3?

26.Ne4! is as close to equal as you can get in a bullet game. Now White is destroyed.

26...Nb4+ 27.Qd3 B×d3+ 0-1

In the next example, Black's material loss is less dramatic, and his compensation less obvious.

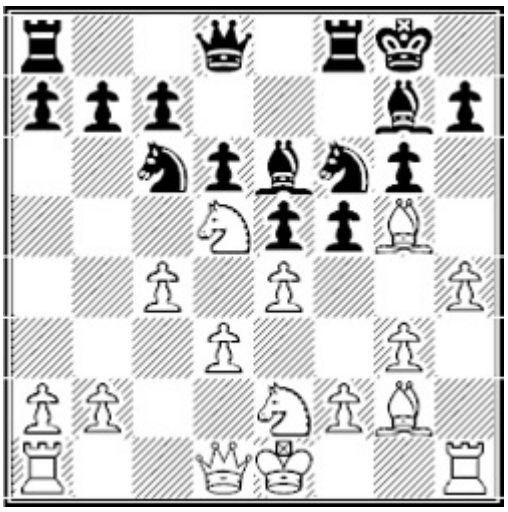
White (2538) – Black (2406) [A26]

1.e4 g6 2.c4 Bg7 3.Nc3 d6 4.g3 Nc6 5.Bg2 e5 6.Nge2 Be6 7.d3 f5 8.h4 Nf6 9.Nd5 0-0 10.Bg5 ***(D)***

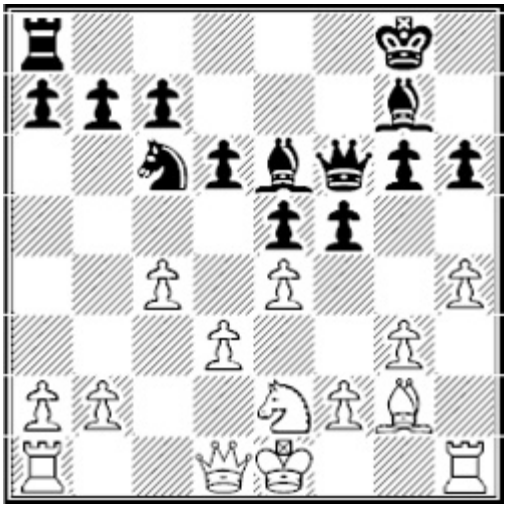
The game is just starting and the position is level, but now Black blunders.

10...h6? 11.N×f6+ R×f6

Rather than give up his h-pawn and control of the g5-square, Black ruthlessly surrenders the exchange. In bullet, as in normal chess, the superiority of a rook over a knight or bishop tends to be less in the middlegame and greater in the endgame. The difference in bullet, though, is that games often don't get to the ending.



12.B×f6 Q×f6



White's material advantage gives him an edge, but there is no easy way for him to convert this to anything concrete. Because of his potential dark-

squared weaknesses, White has many ways to go wrong, and soon does.

Both players had averaged a second a move up to this point, and have 48 seconds remaining.

13.Qd2 Rf8 14.e×f5 g×f5 15.0-0-0 Ne7

Black offers a pawn to open lines to White's king. White accepts the gift, but Black gets counterplay.

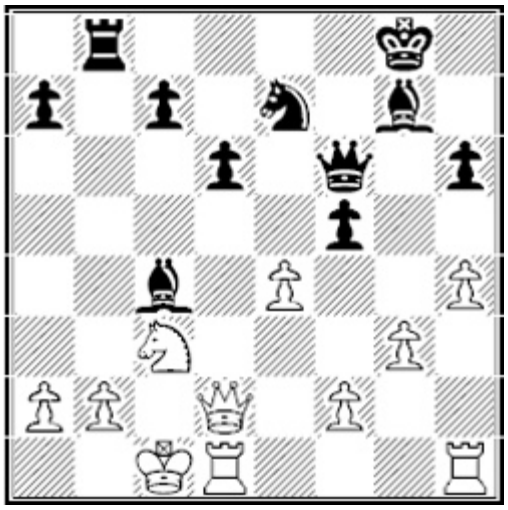
16.B×b7? e4!? 17.d×e4? Rb8 18.Bd5

White took 11 seconds for this move, which fails to defend. This is common in bullet: if a player doesn't find the right continuation immediately, panic may set in and a blunder often results.

18...B×d5 19.Nc3?

This fatalistic move loses. White should recapture on d5 and live with the consequences.

19...B×c4



Now Black has a material and temporal advantage, as well as the initiative. The finish of the game is not for the fainthearted.

20.Rhe1 Nc6 21.f4 Nb4 22.e5 d×e5 23.f×e5 Qa6 24.Re3 B×e5 25.Qd7 N×a2+ 26.N×a2 Q×a2 27.Kd2 Q×b2+ 28.Ke1 Bc3+ 29.R×c3 Qe2 mate 0-1

Fighting for the initiative

In the preceding games, one player pretty much had things his own way. Even at the cost of material, one side made threats and the other side defended against them (or failed to defend against them, in some cases).

Such games are fine for illustrative purposes, but usually things are not so clear, especially in bullet. With both players making mistakes, the initiative can be fickle, changing hands quickly. One moment a player can be attacking, and the next minute he can be defending.

Steinitz taught us that the failure to exploit an advantage can result not only in the loss of that advantage, but also in the opponent gaining an equal or greater advantage. In bullet, this principle applies in spades, as the following example shows.

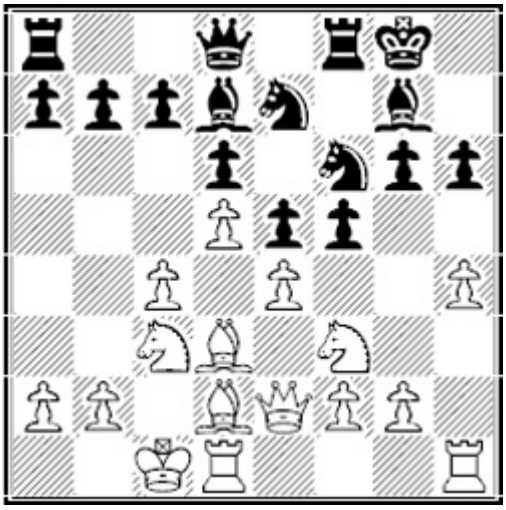
White (2126) – Black (2033) [A04]

1.Nf3 g6 2.e4 Bg7 3.d4 d6 4.Bd3 Nc6 5.c3 e5 6.d5 Nce7 7.h4 h6 8.Bd2 f5 9.Qe2 Nf6 10.c4 0-0 11.Nc3 Bd7 12.0-0-0 ***(D)***

Now that White has committed his king, Black has a target and the play gets sharper. Each player has used about ten seconds.

12...c6 13.Kb1 c×d5 14.c×d5 Rc8 15.Bc1? Qb6?

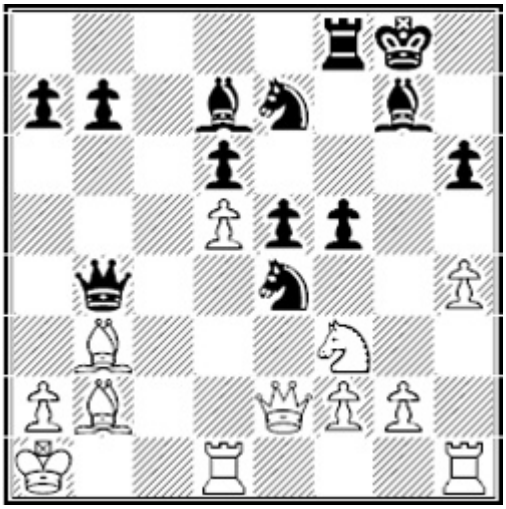
Missing 15...R×c3! 16.b×c3 f×e4, and if White recaptures with 17.B×e4 N×e418.Q×e4?, he loses his queen to 18...Bf5.



16.Ka1 Qb4 17.e×f5 g×f5 18.Bc2 R×c3!?

By now Black is starting to fall behind on time, so he sacrifices the exchange in an effort to make things happen. If nothing else, this might create enough confusion that Black gains some time.

19.b×c3 Q×c3+ 20.Bb2 Qb4 21.Bb3 Ne4

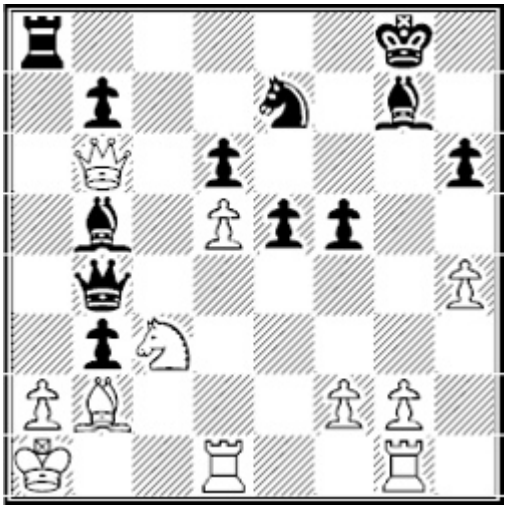


22.Rhg1?!

White must have known this move was too passive when he played it, and it turns out there was indeed something better: 22.N×e5! blows open the position and gives White the initiative (22...d×e5 23.d6+).

22...a5 23.Nd2 Bb5

23...Nc3 was better, but there's no point in quibbling. Black wants the initiative and he's not going to let details stand in his way. Under the barrage of threats, White falls behind in time and his defenses crumble **24.Qe3 a4 25.N×e4 a×b3 26.Nc3 Ra8 27.Qb6**



27...e4!

Defending has worn down White's resistance, and now he was down to only ten seconds.

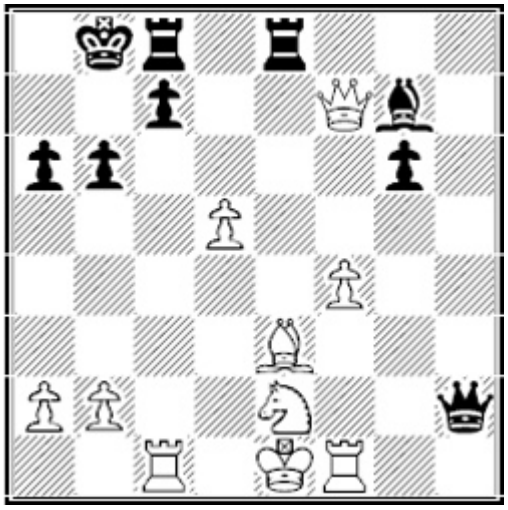
28.Q×b5 R×a2+! 29.N×a2 Q×b5 30.Nc3 Qa5+ 31.Kb1 B×c3 32.B×c3 Q×c3 0-1

White lost on time.

In the next example, White also misses a chance for a decisive blow, and Steinitz's principle is again confirmed. ***(D)***

White (1946) – Black (1937) [A40]

Black has sacrificed a piece, but White's king appears to be somewhat insecure. Time is about equal: White has 16 seconds remaining, and Black 19 seconds.



How should White continue?

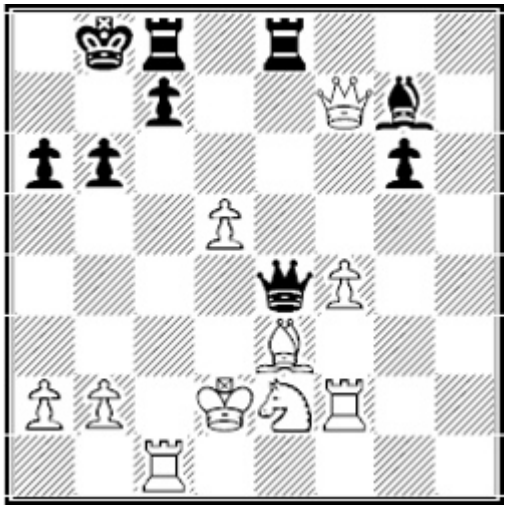
28.Rf2?

White took five seconds to play this defensive move, missing 28.R×c7!, which breaks down Black's defenses. After 28...R×c7 29.Q×e8+, Black's threats vanish and White has a decisive advantage.

28...Qh1+ 29.Kd2

White now has ten seconds left.

29...Qe4



Things are no longer clear, and Black’s time advantage gives him the better chances.

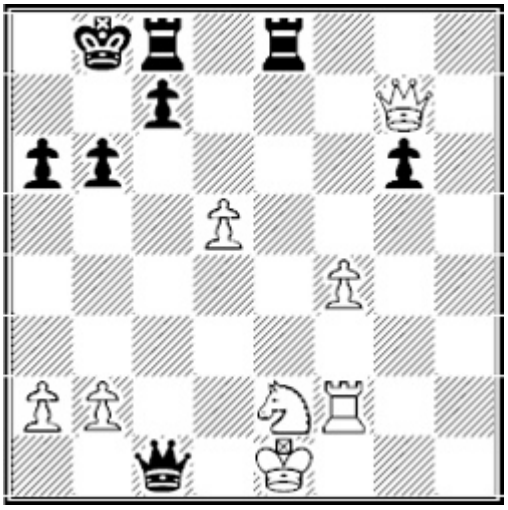
30.Q×g7?

White took another five seconds for this move, which is a mistake. 30.B×b6 was right.

30...Q×e3+ 31.Ke1

With four seconds left, White instinctively protects his f2-rook, overlooking that his other rook is undefended.

31...Q×c1 mate 0-1

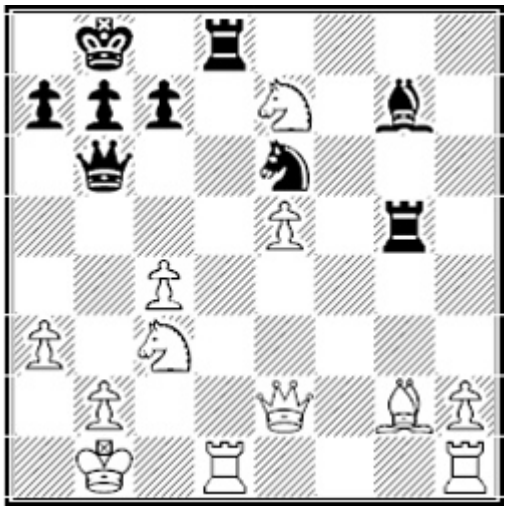


It’s mate. Once White missed 28.R×c7! and lost the initiative, his position disintegrated, both on the board and on the clock.

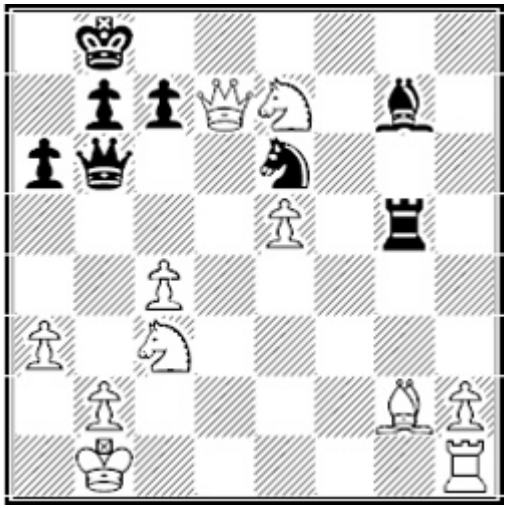
Naturally in bullet examples of missed opportunities that forfeit the initiative can be extreme, and lend credence to the axiom “never resign!”

White (1921) – Black (2010) [A10] ***(D)***

White has completely outplayed his opponent and, with 12 seconds left to Black’s nine seconds, he now begins what should have been the decisive attack.



28.R×d8+ N×d8 29.Qd2! Ne6 30.Qd7! a6



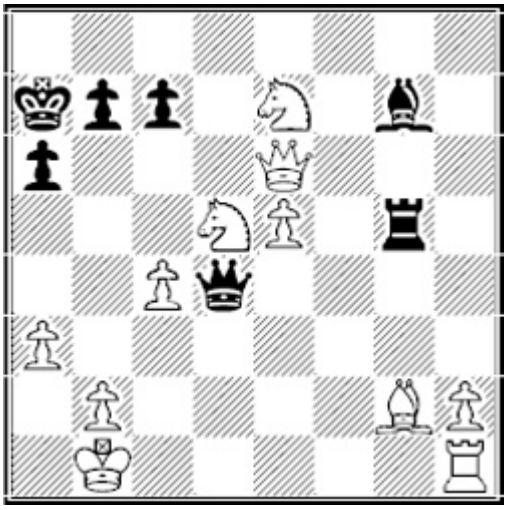
31.Qc8+?

White mates after 31.Qe8+ Ka7 32.Nc8+, but with Black down to five seconds, against White's eight seconds, one would think that anything wins. Famous last words...

31...Ka7 32.Ncd5 Qd4

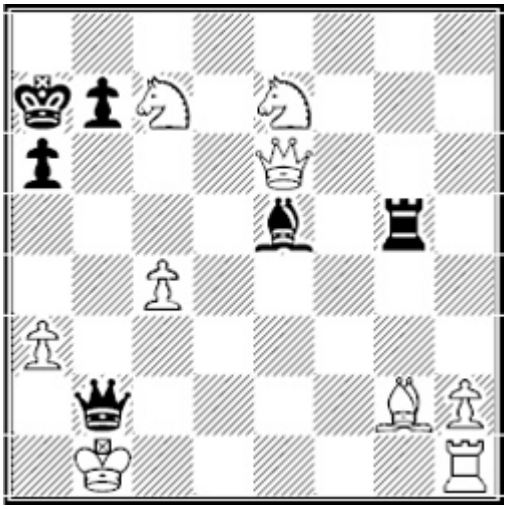
Since White is having trouble finding the mate, Black finds a glimmer of counterplay – a battery directed towards White's b2-pawn.

33.Q×e6?



Another mistake by White, with seven seconds left. Now 33...R×e5 is actually better for Black, but he had no time for such refinements.

33...B×e5!? 34.N×c7? Q×b2 mate 0-1

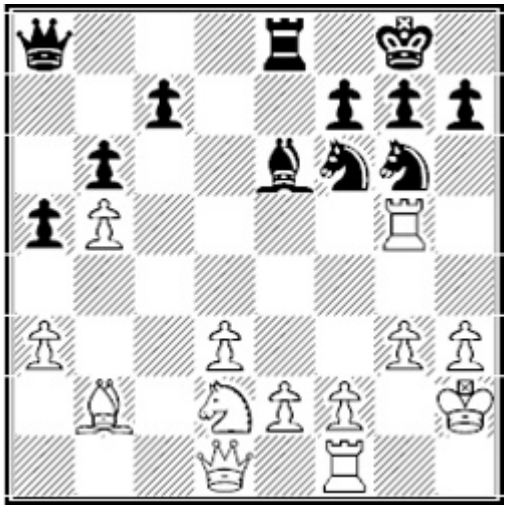


Black had one second left when he delivered checkmate. White certainly can’t complain that he didn’t have his own chances to win.

The initiative as technique

One similarity between bullet and normal chess is that winning a “won” position is not always so easy, especially when time is a factor. Trading whatever material or positional advantage you might have for an attack can be a useful shortcut, which can both speed up the finish to the game and put the opponent in time trouble.

White (1899) – Black (1940) [A00]



Black is in trouble on the board. He is an exchange and a pawn down, with little hope of counterplay against White’s king. The one bright spot is that Black’s material deficit is somewhat offset by his time advantage – Black has 34 seconds remaining to White’s 28 seconds.

We will never know whether this six-second edge would have made a difference had Black tried to just hold on by solid defense. After all, White can start an attack by advancing his f2-pawn. But Black decided to take advantage of the awkward position of White’s g5-rook and regain some of his lost material. In so doing, he cedes White an undisputed initiative.

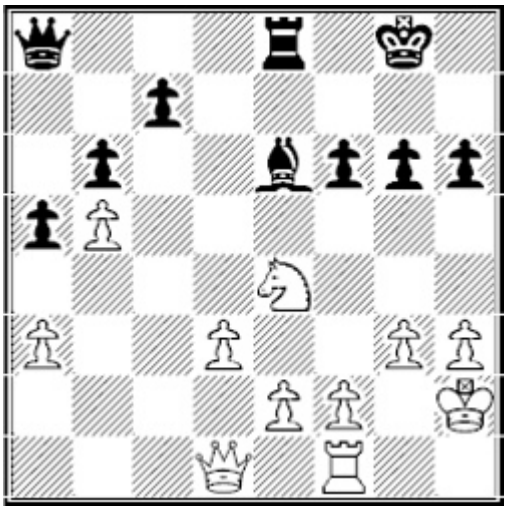
20...h6!? 21.R×g6!

More or less forced, but still strong, as Black's king position is now seriously weakened.

21...f×g6 22.B×f6! g×f6

White now starts to attack the undefended pawns in front of Black's king.

23.Ne4



23...Kf7?

Confronted with a radical change in the position, Black fails to defend accurately. 23...Kg7 and 23...Qd8 were both more tenacious.

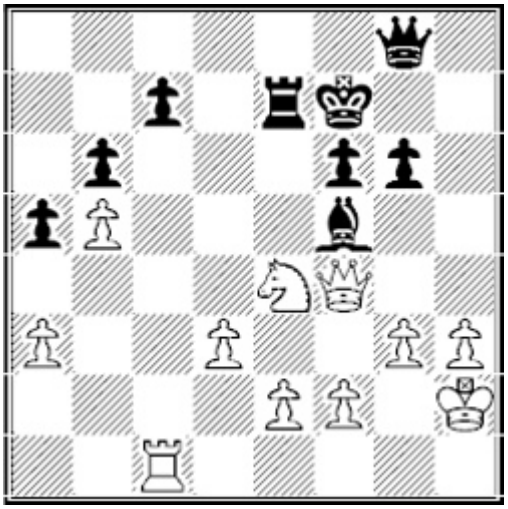
24.Qc1!

Attacking both Black's c7-pawn and h6-pawn.

24...Re7?!

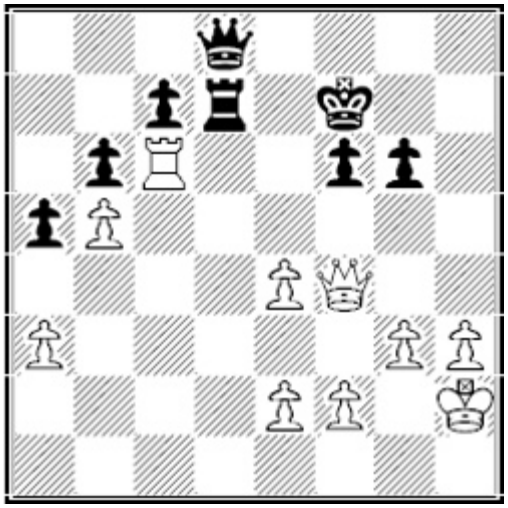
24...Qd8 25.Q×h6 Rh8 was better. Now White's attack gets serious.

25.Q×h6 Qg8 26.Qf4 Bf5 27.Rc1



White brings his last piece into the attack, in the approved manner. As an added bonus, now White is ahead on time.

27...B×e4 28.d×e4 Qd8 29.Rc6 Rd7



30.e5!

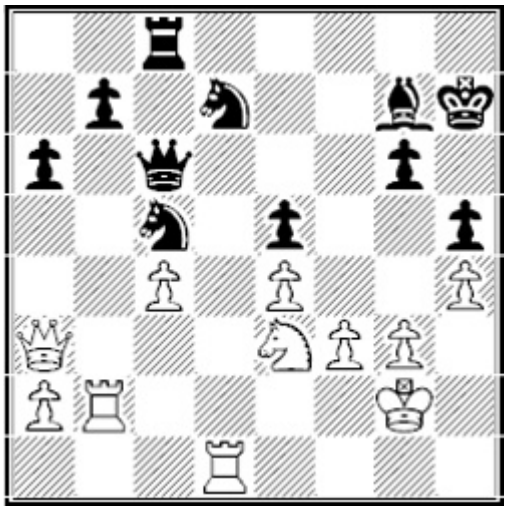
The final blow.

30...f5 31.e6+ 1-0

Black resigned. White had 13 seconds left; Black nine seconds.

Here's another example where an objectively suspect sacrifice allows Black to convert his advantage into a full point.

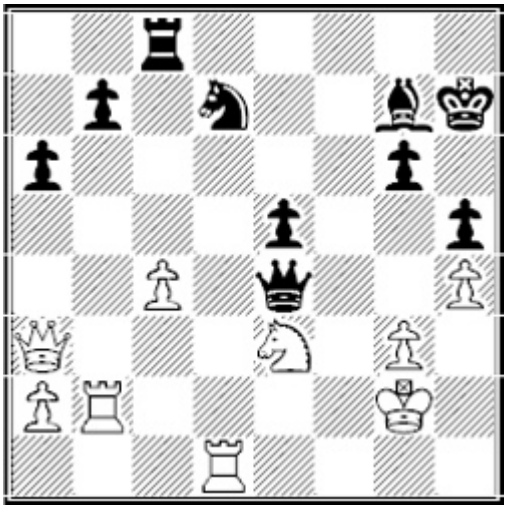
White (1972) – Black (2059) [A04]



After a complicated and eventful game, the players have arrived at a balanced position. Black has the advantage, though, because he has 23 seconds remaining, while White has only 10 seconds left.

Black could sit on the position with 35...Bf8, but instead he decides to sacrifice in order to begin an attack.

36...N×e4!? 37.f×e4 Q×e4+



38.Kf2?!

White starts to send his king in the wrong direction, but such decisions can be hard when you have less than ten seconds left. 38.Kg1! was right, leaving it to Black to justify his sacrifice.

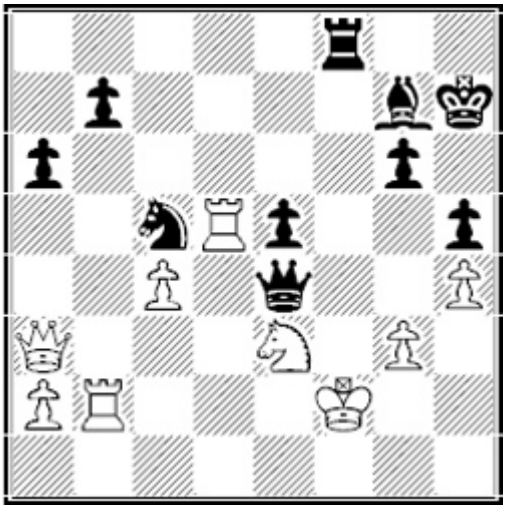
The fact that White may have had a defense does not mean that Black's sacrifice was wrong. In bullet, it can be very effective to force the opponent to make quick decisions in positions such as the one in the previous diagram.

The hardest moves to make quickly are those that involve a fundamental decision (here which direction to go with White's king) which cannot easily be changed.

38...Nc5!

An excellent bullet move, deferring 38...Rf8+. Delaying forcing moves is usually a good idea when the opponent is short of time.

39.Rd5?! Rf8+



40.Ke2?

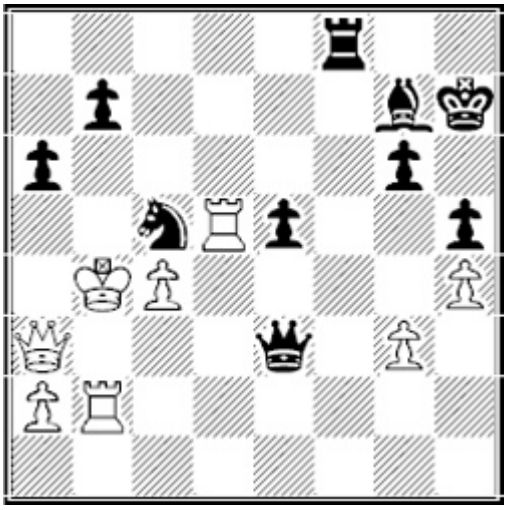
With six seconds left. Now White gets routed.

40...Qf3+ 41.Kd2 Qf2+ 42.Kc3? Q×e3+

42...e4+!, bringing Black's g7-bishop into the attack, was even more devastating.

43.Kb4 ***(D)***

43...a5+!?



Black's time advantage was large enough that the simple 43...Q×a3+ would have won as well, but 43...a5+!? is a useful move to throw in, if only because it was probably unexpected.

With White psychologically committed to moving his king, 43...a5+!? triggers a fatal mistake.

44.K×a5?

White took a second or so to try to find a defense, overlooking that his a3-queen needed protection. 44.Q×a5 wouldn't have saved the game, especially after 44...Na6+!, because White had only a second or two remaining.

44...Q×a3+ 45.Kb6 Q×b2+ 46.K×c5 Qa3+ 0-1

White lost on time. Black had nine seconds left.

Chapter 10

Strategic Focus

In the previous chapter, we discussed how important the initiative is in bullet. Constant pressure, combined with tactical threats, can wear down the most stalwart opponent because for most players it is easier, and faster, to attack than to defend.

Not every position lends itself to this approach, and not every player is able to conjure up attacking moves easily. Trying for the initiative can come at too great a cost, both in terms of material and on the clock. Falling behind on time in order to create threats defeats one of the main purposes of the exercise – namely to gain an advantage in time. This is not to say that in certain positions it isn't worth taking time to find the most forcing continuation, but in so doing you may be committing yourself to forcing checkmate in a relatively few moves or losing on time.

How, then, should one play bullet in positions where it is not possible to speak of a clear initiative by either side? The facetious answer is "quickly," but this is not far from the truth. In bullet positions where there is no obvious attacking possibility, it is essential to play fast because it is usually fatal to spend time on relatively inconsequential moves. This is probably the most common mistake made by players who are new to bullet.

One way to play quickly when it is not possible to find an objectively winning continuation is to decide on a plan and follow it through to its conclusion. Here the differences between bullet and normal chess are pronounced.

In tournament games, or even five-minute chess, the players usually have plans, but these serve more as guidelines than strict rules, and generally players will look for and find tactical opportunities if they present themselves. They will also alter their strategy as required. As Moltke the Elder told us: “No plan survives contact with the enemy.” But this is not always the case in bullet.

Certainly there are more unexpected tactical opportunities in bullet chess than in normal chess because the speed of play results in a lack of precision. Move orders are inverted, threats are overlooked, tactics are missed, and so on. On the other hand, such opportunities are also exploited less frequently in bullet, because both players are subject to the same time pressures. At the highest levels, tactical opportunities are often utilized, but for most players a chance of achieving a significant advantage may appear and disappear in the twinkling of an eye.

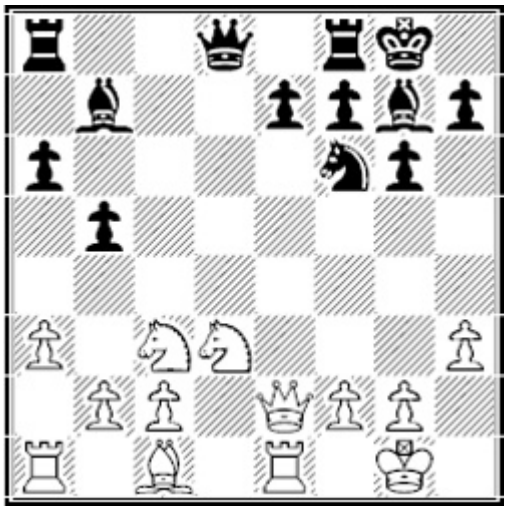
Obviously spotting these opportunities and making the most of them will improve your bullet play, and in later chapters we will turn to this topic. But trying too hard to spot and exploit inaccuracies in your opponents’ play can be counterproductive if it takes too much time and energy. Practically speaking, there is much to be said for finding a clear strategic plan and following it, without being distracted by the details of what is happening on the board. The game might last longer than it would otherwise because of missed tactical opportunities, but strategic focus will help you play more quickly, and that’s important too.

In this chapter, we explore the concept of strategic focus and its application in bullet. In each of the examples which follows one player decides on a

plan or idea, and subordinates everything to that plan. This approach is not always successful, especially if the plan is bad, but it has its merits.

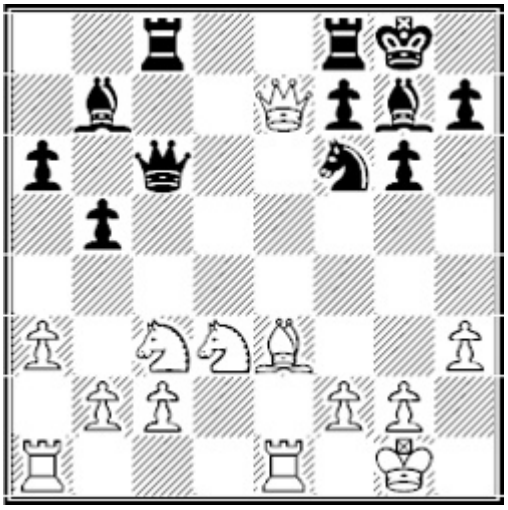
In the first example, Black decides to play for a particular mate and, with some help from his opponent, his plan succeeds.

White (1902) – Black (2154) [B06]



Despite Black's two bishops, White's position is slightly more comfortable. Of course, positional nuances usually don't mean much in bullet. Each player has about 48 seconds left. Black begins by overlooking the threat to his e7-pawn.

14...Rc8? 15.Q×e7 Qb6 16.Be3 Qc6



Black, proud of his b7-bishop, reveals his idea – he wants to checkmate White on g2. White sees the threat and defends against it by blocking the h1-a8 diagonal.

17.f3! Rfe8 18.Qb4 Nh5

Black plays the rest of the game with little subtlety. His idea is to mate White on g2, and almost all his moves revolve around this goal. While this plan shouldn't succeed and doesn't cause Black to play the best moves, it at least lets him play quickly.

19.Bf2 Qf6

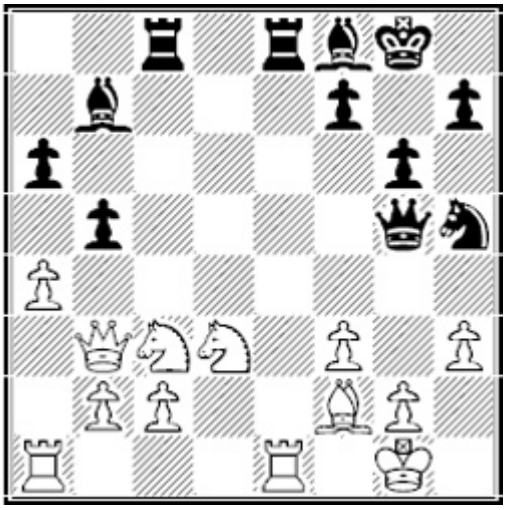
With Black's deep strategic secret revealed, the reason for this move is obvious.

20.a4

For his part, White continues to play strong, solid moves, increasing his advantage. This is, of course, the main drawback to committing to one idea

to the exclusion of anything else. Your opponent may improve his position, and if your strategy fails, there may not be anything left.

20...Bf8 21.Qb3 Qg5

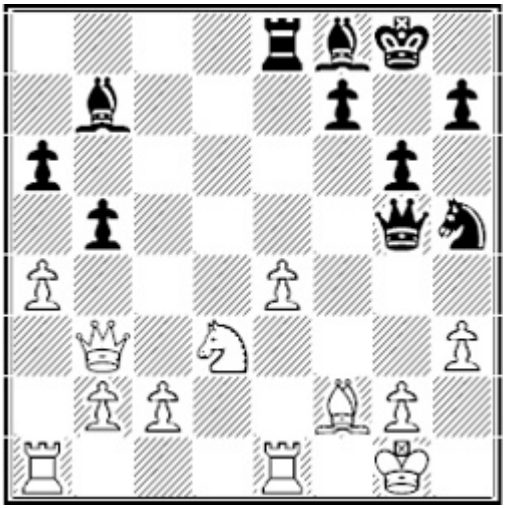


Black has managed to create a threat – 22...B×f3! But White sees this threat too.

22.Ne4 R×e4

Black gives up material rather than surrender his b7-bishop.

23.f×e4 Re8



24.e5?

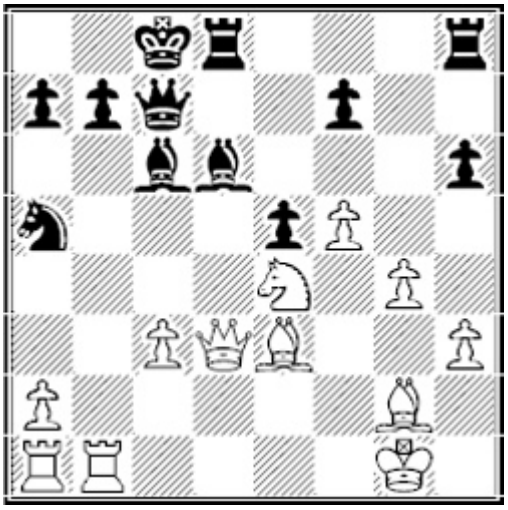
White had many moves which were stronger than this one.

24...Q×g2 mate 0-1

Persistence of this sort is rarely rewarded in tournament games, but in bullet a single idea can often bring victory.

In the next game, White’s idea is a little less crude, but the road to victory is a very bumpy one.

White (2295) – Black (2313) [A00]



23.Qe2

The position is approximately equal, including on time (each side has about 35 seconds). White now comes up with an idea – to attack along the g1-a7 diagonal by bringing his queen to f2. This plan is not a bad one, and by giving White a clear goal, it makes it easier for him to find moves.

23...Kb8?

As is sometimes the case, Black took a long time (nine seconds) to blunder. The right defense was 23...B×e4 24.B×e4 Bc5, exchanging a pair of minor pieces. Black may have decided to keep his c6-bishop because he considered it to be the foundation of his defense. It certainly defends his b7-pawn, but it turns out that his real problem is on a7.

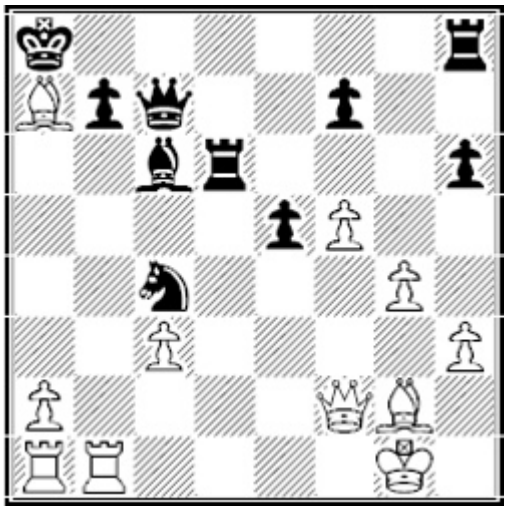
24.Qf2?

White follows up with his idea, but the opportunistic 24.Qa6!, attacking Black's a7-pawn, won immediately (24...b6 25.Q×a5). This illustrates how pursuing a single idea carries with it the danger of losing flexibility and missing chances, and may therefore do more harm than good.

24...Ka8

Black panics and gives up his a7-pawn, but this offers little hope of a successful defense. He had to play 24...b6!, when 25.R×b6+!? a×b6 26.B×b6 is unclear.

25.B×a7 Nc4 26.N×d6 R×d6



27.Bc5?

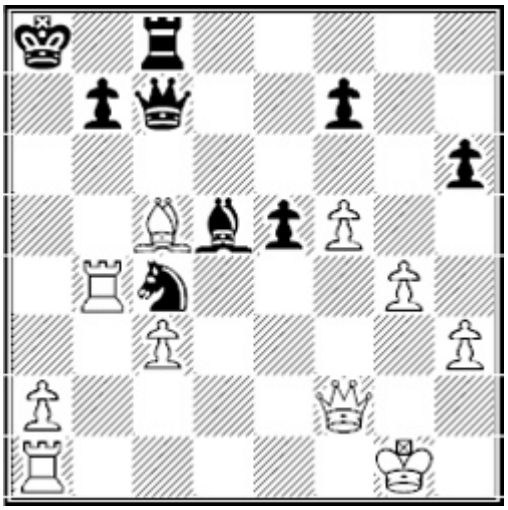
27.Qc5!, pinning Black's c6-bishop and attacking Black's c4-knight, would have collapsed Black's resistance. But White was pursuing his plan of winning along the g1-a7 diagonal, which now involves somehow getting his queen to a7. 27.Bc5? gives Black a chance to turn the game around.

27...Rd5?

Overlooking 27...Rd2!, which wins for Black! This oversight is all the more surprising because Black took five seconds to play 27...Rd5?, which loses quickly (perhaps it's not so surprising, as we have seen before that thinking can lead to errors). Both sides apparently convinced themselves that White

was the only one who was attacking, and also that the key point in the attack was Black's b7-pawn. But rather than stemming the attack, 27...Rd5? accelerates it.

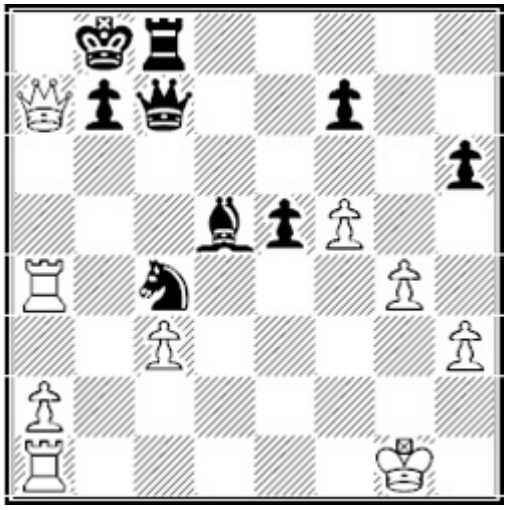
28.B×d5 B×d5 29.Rb4 Rc8?



A terrible move, which blocks the escape route of Black's king, thereby allowing White to execute his original plan. In Black's defense, at this point White had 25 seconds remaining and Black had only 14 seconds, so time was a factor.

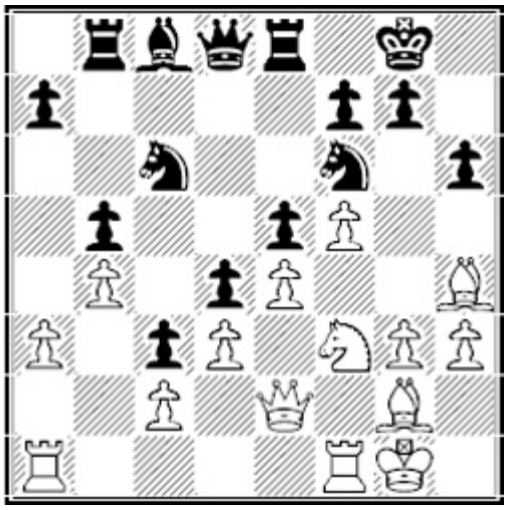
30.Ra4+ Kb8 31.Ba7+ Ka8 32.Bb8+ K×b8 33.Qa7 mate 1-0 ***(D)***

This is the position White had in mind for the last ten moves... Black would have had a good position if he hadn't been checkmated.



In the next example, White initiates a kingside attack, which succeeds almost through sheer persistence and nothing else. The play begins with a startling illustration of the kind of tunnel vision which can be more kindly termed “strategic focus.”

White (2035) – Black (1986) [A00]



The players have arrived at a double-edged position, with Black boasting a slight time advantage (39 seconds to White’s 36 seconds). Black also would have a slight positional advantage after 18...Qd6, unpinning his f6-knight

and preparing to attack White’s b4-pawn with 19..a5. Instead Black plays inexactly...

18...Qd5?

As a result of this imprecise move, which clearly was a mouse slip...

19.g4?

... Black loses a tempo. Of course, had White played 19.e×d5, it would have cost Black a little more than that. Isn’t bullet great?

19...Qd6 20.g5!?

As is becoming clear, White is pursuing a single-minded plan: to attack Black’s king. It shouldn’t work, but it has two virtues. The first is that if the plan *does* work, then Black is likely to be checkmated and White will win the game. That’s a plus. The second point is that White has an easier time finding moves than Black, because he doesn’t really have to think as much. In bullet, that might be an even bigger plus.

20...Nh7!? 21.Kh1 h×g5

Black could just maintain the tension on the kingside and start operations on the queenside, but he falls in with White’s plans and also plays on the kingside.

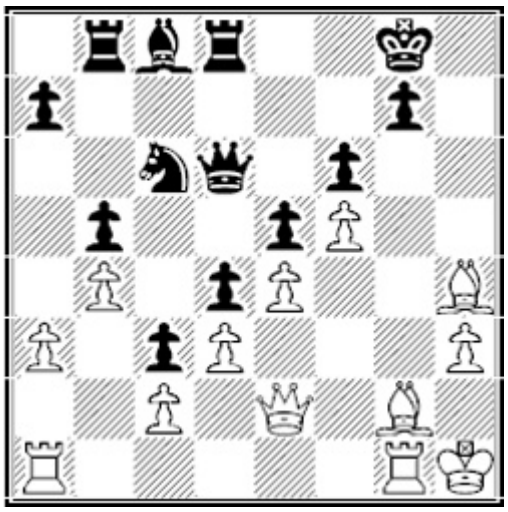
22.N×g5 N×g5?!

Black is keeping his time advantage, but 22...Qh6! would stop White’s attack dead in its tracks.

23.B×g5 f6 24.Bh4

Black still has a slight advantage.

24...Rd8 25.Rg1

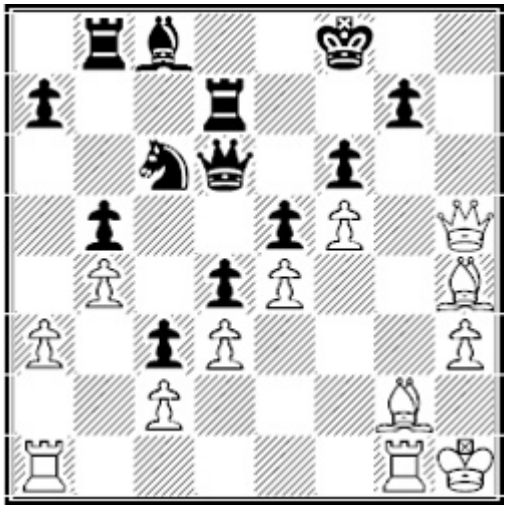


White continues with his plan to attack his opponent's king. He has 23 seconds left to Black's 25 seconds.

25...Kf8?

The first good sign, from White's point of view. Black is reacting to White's kingside activity, and as a result White doesn't yet have to worry about his queenside. In addition, 25...Kf8? is a mistake which weakens Black's defenses, allowing White to create real threats.

26.Qh5! Rd7?



After this mistake, Black is losing. Black also took seven seconds on 26...Rd7?, trying to defend against an attack that was never supposed to have happened, so White now has a time advantage as well.

27.Bf3?

This doesn't give away all of White's advantage, but 27.Qh8+ Kf7 28.Bf3 was immediately decisive.

27...Rf7

Black is now down to 15 seconds.

28.Qh8+ Ke7 29.Bh5?

White is paying too much attention to the clock, and not enough to the board. The obvious 29.R×g7 broke through.

29...Bd7

Black misses 29...B×f5!, creating chaos.

30.Qh7

Now White is back on track.

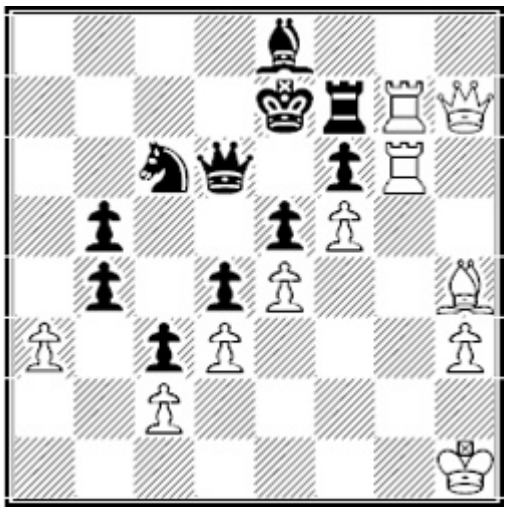
30...Rbf8

Black took another four seconds for this move, but now there is no escape.

31.B×f7 R×f7 32.R×g7 Be8 33.Rag1 a5

What would have been the start of a strong queenside attack some ten moves ago is now just a desperate counterattack. White finishes his attack elegantly.

34.R1g6! a×b4



35.B×f6+!

With his opponent having only four seconds left, White presses his advantage.

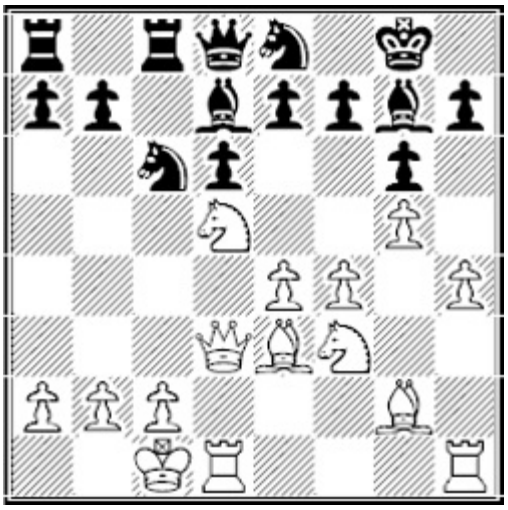
35...Q×f6 36.R×f6 K×f6 37.Qg6+ Ke7 38.R×f7+ B×f7 39.Q×c6 b×a3 40.Qc5+ Kf6 41.Q×a3 1-0

Black forfeited on time. White's refusal to be distracted from his plan paid off.

By now many readers might be wondering what would happen if both players decided on a plan and stuck to their guns, come what may. We then see a game of chicken, with each player trying to force the other to blink first. In the end, objective considerations reemerge to restore a sense of reality to the proceedings.

White (1803) – Black (1964) [B06]

In this tense position, each player has about 45 seconds remaining. Both sides are thinking aggressively (White's last move was 15.h4), and Black accordingly begins an attack on the queenside.



15...b5?!

Black had better. 15...e6! 16.Nc3 Nb4! left him with a big advantage, and 16.Nf6+ B×f6! 17.g×f6 Nb4 doesn’t help. Black notices this possibility on his next move, triggering a bloody struggle, in which each side ignores his opponent in the hope of seizing the initiative.

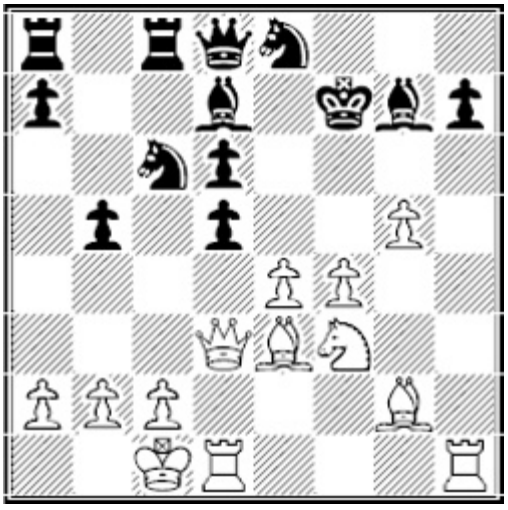
16.h5?! e6! 17.h×g6!?

White has no intention of retreating, and plays solely for the attack.

17...e×d5?!

Black’s heart is in the right place, but the simple 17...h×g6 was saner and safer.

18.g×f7+ K×f7



19.e×d5?

An illusory gain of time, since Black’s c6-knight wanted to move anyway. 19.Q×d5+ was much stronger, as 19...Be6 fails to 20.g6+!, clearing the g5 square for White’s knight (20...h×g6+ 21.Ng5+ Q×g5? 22.Q×g5).

White may have missed 20.g6+!, which is a hard move to see. Black certainly did.

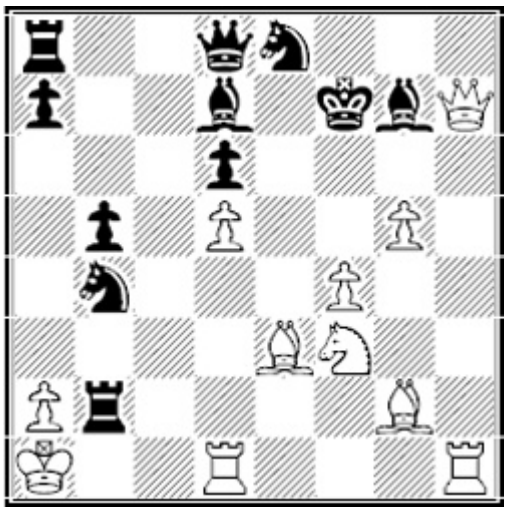
19...Nb4

Now White is crushed, not because he lost the battle of wills and defended first, but simply because Black's attack is stronger and it's hard to attack when you are being mated.

20.Q×h7 R×c2+ 21.Kb1

21.Q×c2 avoids mate, but would hardly save the game.

21...R×b2+ 22.Ka1



22...Nc2+?

Black either overlooked White's reply (a backwards diagonal move), or just failed to see 22...R×a2+ 23.Kb1 Ra1 mate.

23.Q×c2 R×c2+ 24.Kb1 Rb2+ 25.Ka1 R×g2+

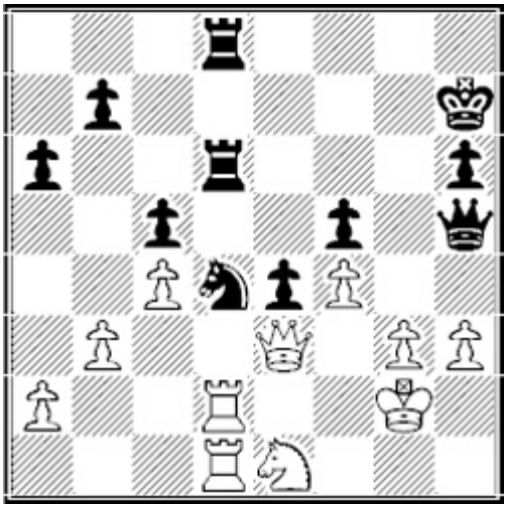
Despite missing mate, Black is in no danger of having the game slip away. With time still equal (24 seconds left for each player), Black's massive material and positional advantage is enough to win, even in bullet.

26.Bd4 Bg4 27.B×g7 N×g7 28.Nh4 Qa5! 29.N×g2 Qc3+ 0-1

In the next example, Black has a clear positional advantage and has to come up with a way of breaking through. He finds a weakness in his opponent's position and conceives of a winning plan, then he so fixates on his intended combination that he misses even easier ways to win.

In the end everything ends happily, as Black's initial idea works, although the winning combination is by no means obvious and could easily have been misplayed.

White (1938) – Black (2159) [A00]



Black has a dominating position, mainly because of his powerfully posted d4-knight and White's weakness on f3. With 26 seconds remaining to White's 24 seconds, Black's prospects are good, although there is nothing immediately decisive if White defends carefully.

34.a3

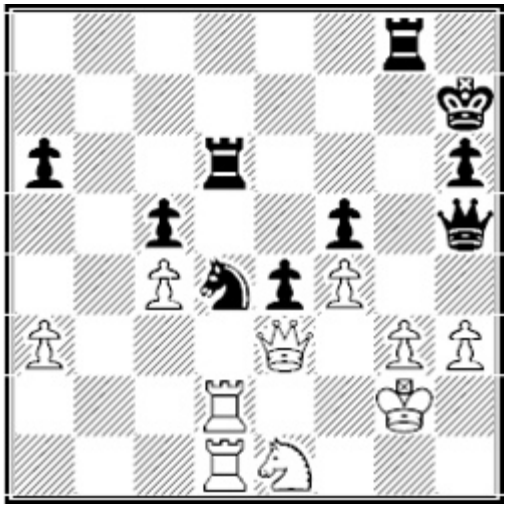
Feeling an irresistible impulse to do something active, White prepares the advance b3-b4.

34...Rg8!

For his part, Black also finds a plan – to pile up on White's weak g3-pawn. This idea has the twin virtues of simplicity and the creation of a direct threat, and is much better than simply sitting on the position and hoping for something good to happen.

In fact, it is Black's discovery of the winning idea that causes White to react violently and give Black other opportunities, not that Black notices them, much less takes advantage of them.

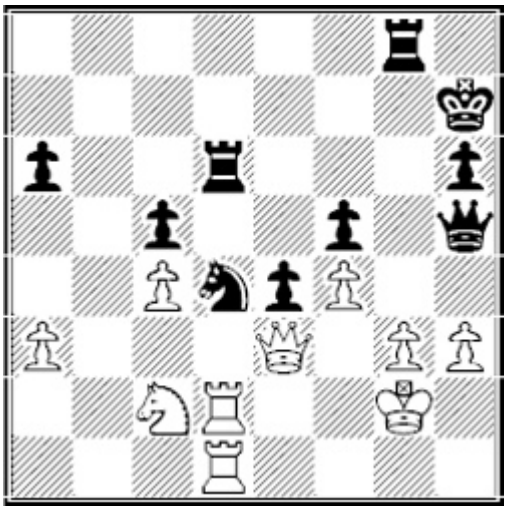
35.b4 b6 36.b×c5 b×c5



Now White must find another plan, since he has completed his queenside attack. Black threatens 37...Rdg6, with dire threats against White's g3-pawn. White's best chance is to sacrifice the exchange on d4, although this

leads to a lost ending after 37.R×d4 R×d4 38.R×d4 c×d4 39.Q×d4 Qe2+ 40. Qf2 Q×f2+ 41.K×f2 Rc8. Instead White tries to exploit the pin down the d-file by increasing the pressure on Black's d4-knight.

37.Nc2?



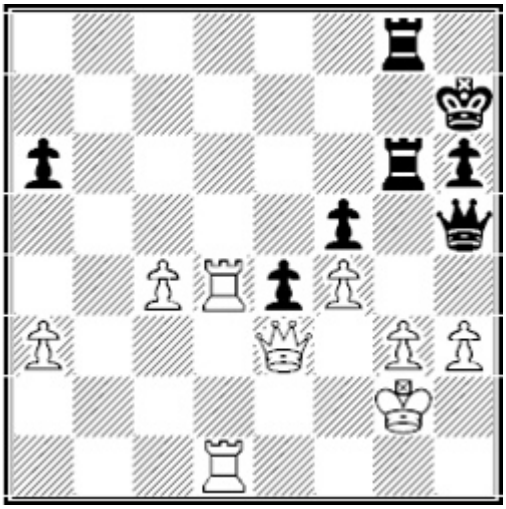
This move loses in two different ways.

37...Rdg6!?

With 24 seconds left, Black sticks to his plan. The other way was the more opportunistic 37...N×c2!, as the pin on the d-file is illusory (38.R×d6 N×e3+) and White's d2-rook is severely overloaded (38.R×c2 Q×d1). Of course Black didn't see the refutations of 37.Nc2? because he wasn't looking for them.

Can we call 37...Rdg6!? a mistake? We don't think so, because in bullet it is often fastest (and therefore best!) to stick with a simple, sound plan. As will be seen in a moment, though, Black's breakthrough is not all that simple.

38.N×d4 c×d4 39.R×d4



39...R×g3+

This wins, but only if followed up correctly.

40.Q×g3 Qe2+!

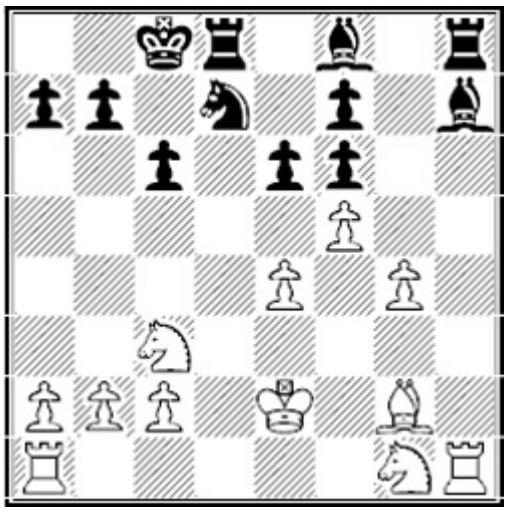
This is the winning idea, although 40...Qf3+! works as well.

41.Kg1 R×g3+ 0-1

White resigned.

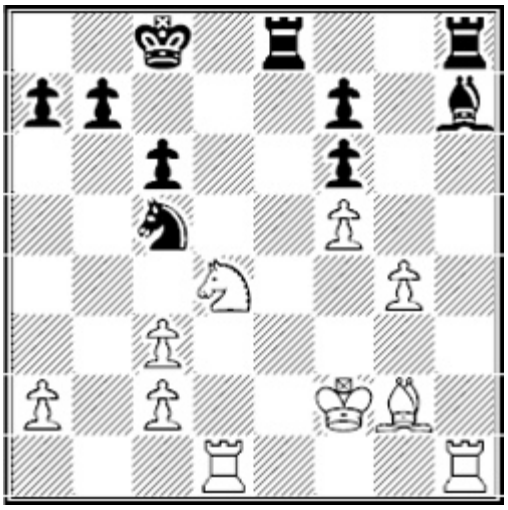
In the next examples, White's strategy is more long-term and sedate, being built around exploiting the poor position of a single enemy piece: his opponent's bishop.

White (1995) – Black (2101) [A00]



Black has managed to saddle himself with a hideous bishop on h7. This makes White's play very easy – he just trades pieces whenever he can, and wins with his "extra" piece. If White can actually capture Black's h7-bishop, so much the better, but this isn't really necessary. Black's prospects are not improved by his eight-second time deficit (White has 43 seconds vs. Black's 35 seconds).

16.Rd1 Bb4 17.Nf3 B×c3 18.b×c3 Rde8 19.Kf2 Nc5 20.Nd4 e×f5 21.e×f5



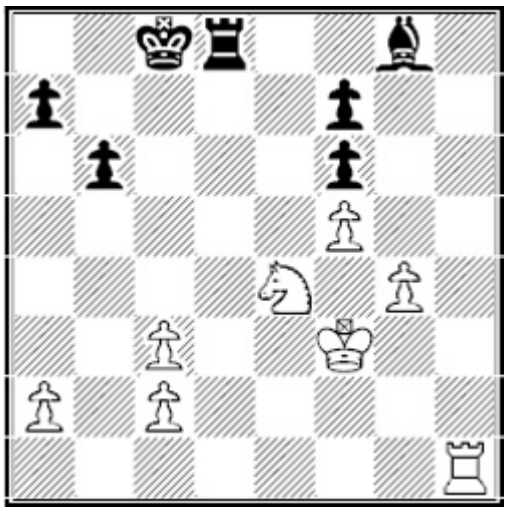
21...Ne4+?!

With the clock running and his bishop still hopelessly entombed on h7, Black understandably feels the need to do something, but White wants to exchange pieces.

22.B×e4 R×e4 23.Kf3 Re5 24.Rde1

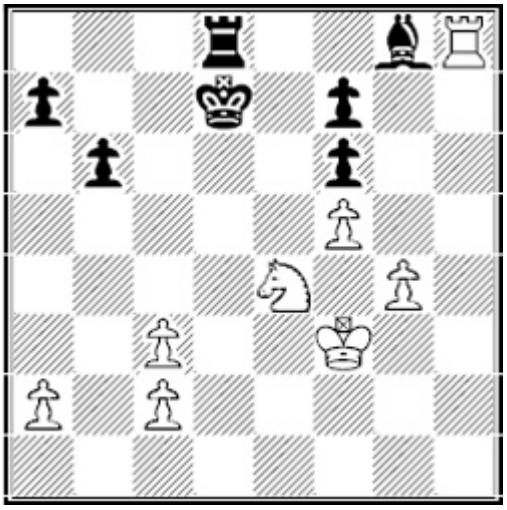
Consistent to a fault. White could win more directly by doubling on the h-file, but as long as Black's h7-bishop is still on the board, Black will take time trying to make use of it.

24...c5 25.Nb3 R×e1 26.R×e1 Rd8 27.Rh1 Bg8 28.N×c5 b6 29.Ne4



White has no concerns about being pinned along the h1-a8 diagonal, as Black's g8-bishop is securely buried behind his f7-pawn.

29...Kc7 30.Rh8 Kd7



Giving White a chance for a fancy combination, which forces the exchange of all of Black's remaining pieces – at a premium. White still has a five-second edge.

31.R×g8 R×g8 32.N×f6+ Ke7 33.N×g8+ 1-0

The next game has the same theme, although in a more complicated setting.

White (1914) – Black (1842) [A00]

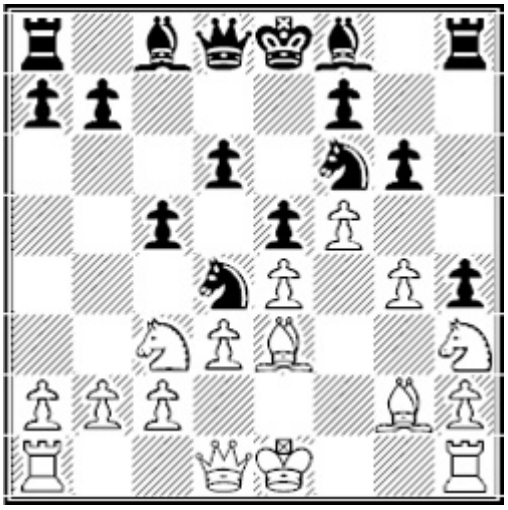
1.g3 e5 2.Bg2 Nc6 3.d3 h5 4.Nc3

White ignores Black's attack down the h-file, either intentionally or inadvertently.

4...h4 5.Nh3 d6 6.e4 Nd4 7.Be3 c5 8.f4 Nf6 9.f5!?

With this advance, White hopes to induce Black's next move.

9...g6!? 10.g4



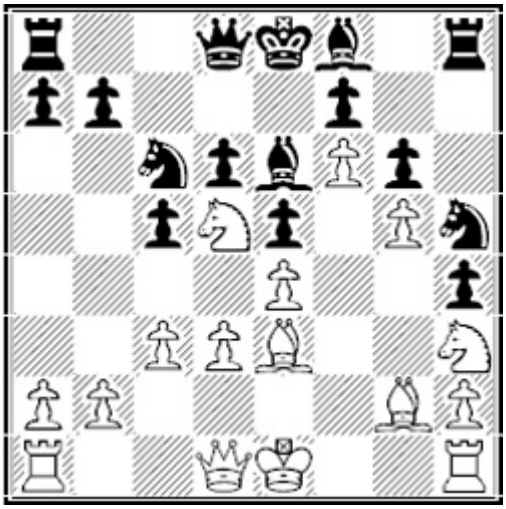
10...Qb6

Black could have created chaos with 10...N×g4!? 11.Q×g4 N×c2+ and 12...N×a1, although White wouldn’t object to playing the resulting position. The move played is not bad either.

11.g5?! Nh5?

11...Q×b2! was much stronger than this automatic reaction to 11.g5?! To make things worse, Black took five seconds to reject 11...Q×b2 and now finds himself behind on time, while White seizes the initiative, along with most of the board.

12.Nd5 Qd8 13.c3 Nc6 14.f6 Be6



Black's main problems are his f8-bishop, which can't move, and his 13-second time deficit (24 seconds to White's 37 seconds). White therefore conceives of a simple strategic plan – invite Black to exchange his active pieces, while continuing to cramp his inactive ones, and in the meantime run Black out of time. Bullet is not for the kind hearted.

15.c4!?

Inviting Black's c6-knight into d4.

15...Nd4 16.B×d4 e×d4 17.Qf3 Qd7 18.Nf2 h3

This doesn't help.

19.B×h3 B×h3 20.N×h3 0-0-0 21.Nf2 Kb8 22.0-0-0 Qc6 23.Kb1 Qa6 24.b3 b5 25.h4 b×c4 26.d×c4 Rd7 27.Ng4 Rb7 28.Qg2?!

28.Qd3 was the obvious move, but Black was about to run out of time.

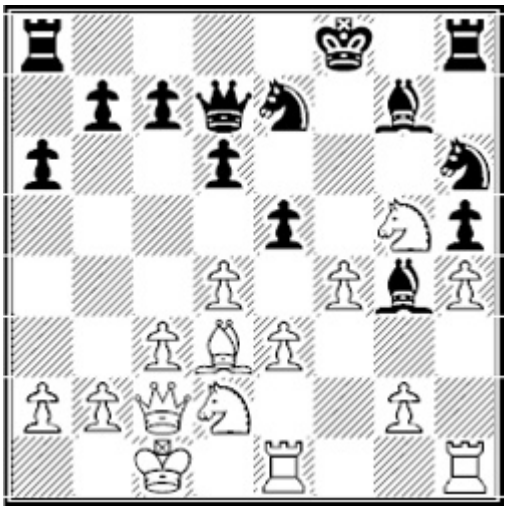
28...Qa4

White’s c4-pawn was hanging, but after White’s next move Black ran out of time. White had five seconds left.

29.Qh2 1-0

In our final example, Black conceives of a brilliant strategic idea, which he carries out so quickly that he also gains a time advantage. Then he ruins it all...

White (2098) – Black (2002) [A40]

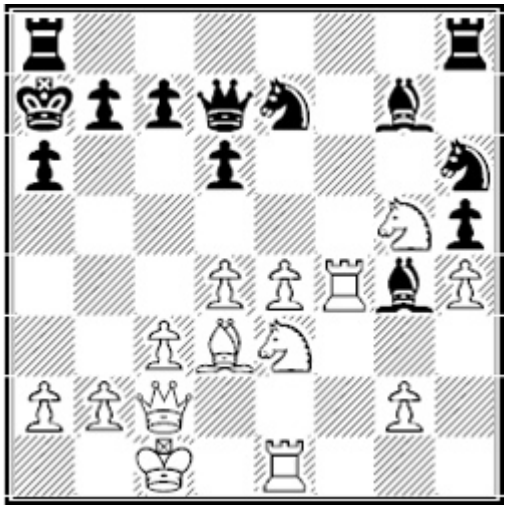


White has sacrificed a piece for two pawns and the initiative, which in bullet is almost always a good deal. With 37 seconds remaining to Black’s 38 seconds, time isn’t yet a factor, but the prospect of a difficult (and time-consuming) defense made Black uneasy. In this challenging position, Black came up with a startlingly logical and simple plan – to run his king to the queenside, where it would no longer come under attack.

15...e×f4 16.Rhf1 Ke8!

The start of a kingwalk.

17.R×f4 Kd8 18.e4 Kc8 19.Nc4 Kb8 20.Ne3 Ka7



Mission accomplished! With five successive king moves, Black has transformed the position. The material imbalance is unchanged, but neither of White's extra pawns is passed, and with his king safe Black has every prospect of converting his material advantage.

Best of all, Black's single-minded maneuver was carried out in three or four seconds, so that he now has a five-second lead in time.

21.Qf2?

Thrown by this development, White errs.

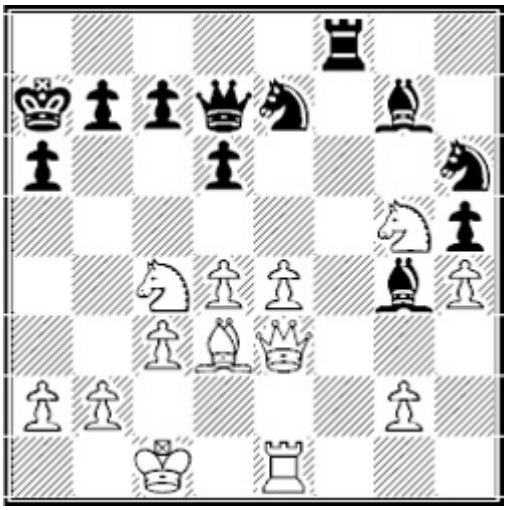
21...Rhf8?!

21...Ng6! would have won the exchange, as White's f4-rook has no squares. Then this game would have perfectly illustrated the theme of this chapter. In reality, bullet is often not so simple.

22.Nc4 R×f4

Again, 22...Ng6! was very strong.

23.Q×f4 Rf8 24.Qe3 ... 1-0



Unfortunately for Black, this game did not have a happy ending. He lost the thread, squandered his positional and time advantages, and managed to lose.

This debacle, which we will not share with you, was witnessed by one of the authors. It was a direct result of Black’s happiness with his kingwalk, which destroyed his concentration.

There may be a lesson there as well.

Chapter 11

Tactics

Pins, forks, skewers, discovered attacks, overloads... Tactics make the chess world go around. What's not to like about tactics, unless you're on the wrong end of them?

Tactical understanding is an essential component of chess strength in tournament play, bullet and every rate of play in between. A rising tide raises all boats, and as your tactics improve, your overall results will improve as well, including your bullet results. If bullet either inspires you to improve your tactics or helps you do so, so much the better.

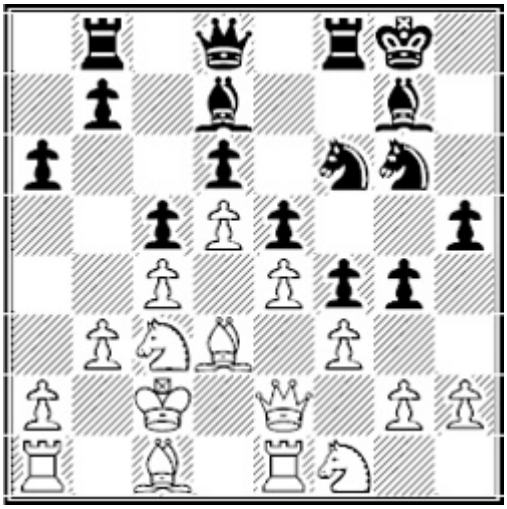
In this chapter we will give some examples of tactics in bullet games, and later will return to this theme in more depth when we mine the rich deposits of bullet blunders, many (but not all) of which involve tactical oversights.

For tactics to succeed in bullet, they don't have to be completely sound – although that never hurts – but they have to be either tricky or timely. In other words, there is a significant psychological component to bullet tactics, and deceptive and unexpected tactics have a much better chance of working, just as in normal chess. The difference is that in bullet tricks can still work even if they are "obvious" – as long as they are obvious only after the game is over. There are no points given for winning a post-mortem in bullet, if anyone was ever inclined to conduct one! The test, as always, is whether something works.

As the following examples show, bullet offers players a wide scope for tactical creativity, because the defender often doesn't have enough time to find the right defense.

Our first example combines two common tactical motifs – a pin and an overload.

White (2162) – Black (1933) [A40]

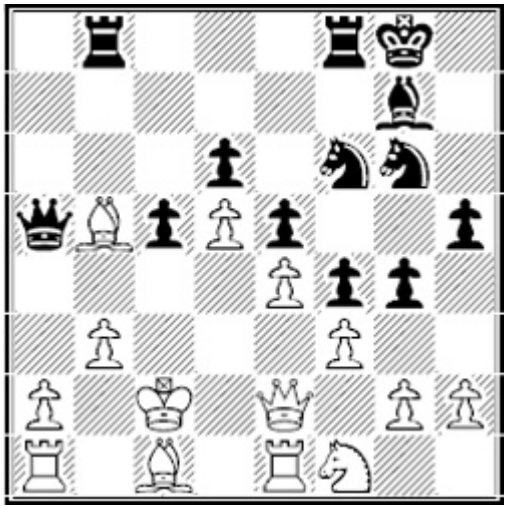


After a somewhat unusual opening, the honors have been roughly split. Material and time are both even, with each player having 46 seconds remaining. Black now opens a second front on the queenside, either deliberately sacrificing a pawn or simply miscounting the number of pieces controlling b5.

20...b5!? 21.c×b5 a×b5 22.N×b5 B×b5 23.B×b5

Black's "sacrifice," if that's what it was, doesn't give him much compensation, and one can anticipate that he will later regret exchanging his d7-bishop. But Black has one hope.

23...Qa5!?



24.a4?

Here this natural move, which is often seen in Benko Gambit positions, is a blunder. It seems like a good idea for White to block the b-file, choking off Black's counterplay, but in his haste to play a strong positional move, White overlooks that his rooks are not yet connected.

24...R×b5!

White's strongly protected b5-bishop in fact isn't protected at all, because White's a4-pawn is pinned to his a1-rook, while White's queen must remain at e2, to defend White's e1-rook. This unusual mixture of tactical themes was enough to throw White off track.

25.Q×b5?

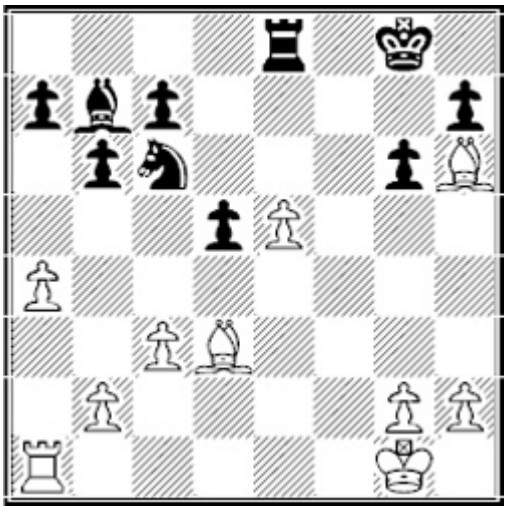
This move reveals that White overlooked that his e1-rook was undefended. After 25.Bd2! Rb4, Black is better, but the game is hardly over.

25...Q×e1 26.Qd3 Qf2+ 27.Nd2 Q×g2 ... 0-1

The collapse of White's kingside pawn chain, coupled with his material deficit, decides the issue. With a few more seconds than his opponent, Black was able to promote several pawns and won in another 25 moves or so.

Pins and forks are our favorite tricks. Throw in a discovered attack, and even the simplest position can become complicated.

White (2051) – Black (2093) [A40]



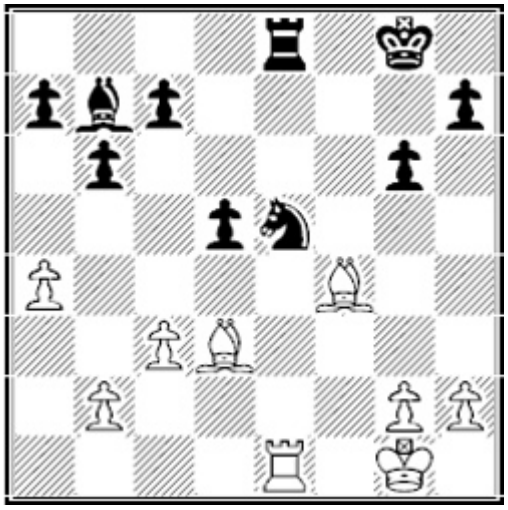
Black, with 31 seconds remaining, has just played 24...Re8, attacking White's e5-pawn for a second time. White, with 25 seconds left, now has to solve some tactical problems involving pins and forks, the two most common molecules in the tactical chemistry of chess.

25.Bf4?

White took six seconds to set a trap for his opponent, overlooking that he was actually trapping himself. His best chance was 25.Bb5!, pinning

Black’s c6-knight, after which White could get into an opposite-colored bishop ending, although this wouldn’t solve all his problems. With rooks on the board, Black’s advantage in time would give him serious winning chances.

25...N×e5! 26.Re1?



This is White’s idea. Ignoring Black’s threat of 26...N×d3, he pins Black’s e5-knight. How can Black avoid material loss?

26...Nf3+!

By winning material himself! Optically 26...N×d3 was almost irresistible, because Black both takes an undefended piece and also forks White’s two remaining pieces. But in fact 26...N×d3? fails to 27.R×e8+ Kf7 28.Rb8, when White comes out ahead.

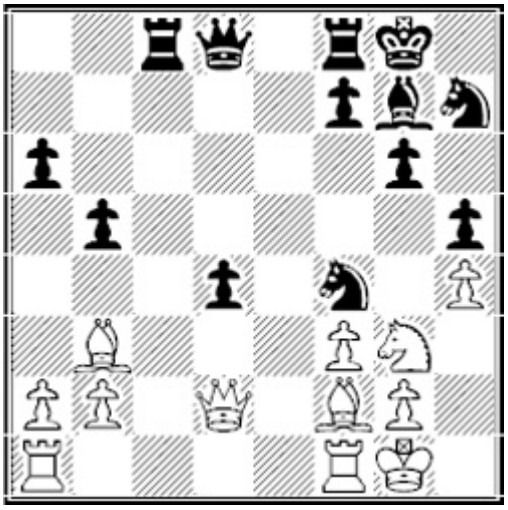
In contrast, 26...Nf3+! is hard to see. The discovered attack on White’s e1-rook is nothing, because White can move his king to protect his rook; and the knight fork is pointless, because White can just capture Black’s f3-knight. But White can’t do both...

27.Kf2 N×e1 28.Bb5 Rf8! 0-1

Down nine seconds on time, White resigned.

A familiarity with standard tactical patterns often pays dividends in bullet. If one player sees a familiar pattern coming and the other doesn't, the game can end quickly.

White (1956) – Black (2143) [B06]

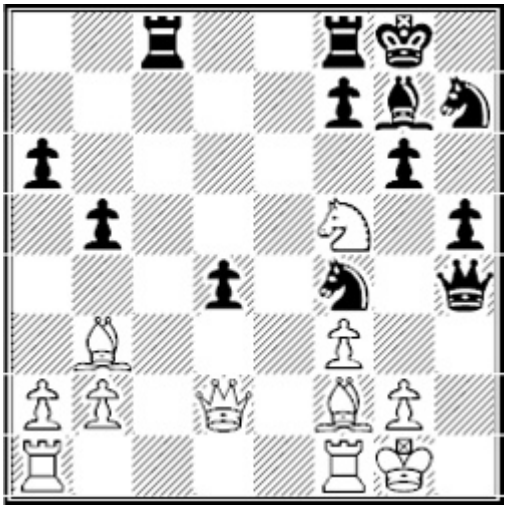


Black is doing well. He is a solid pawn up, with a ten-second lead in time (37 to 27 seconds). However, Black's f4-knight is attacked, and he must do something about it.

23...Q×h4?!

After five seconds thought, Black grabs a second pawn, but it was better to play either 23...Bh6 (threatening 24...Nh3+) or simply 23...Ne6.

24.Nf5?



White took several seconds to find this tricky response. Black's queen is now attacked twice, and at first glance it looks like White will be able to eliminate Black's g7-bishop and then capture Black's d4-pawn. But this plan collapses because all the ingredients for an age-old tactic have suddenly fallen into place.

After 25.Ne4!, Black must sacrifice a piece with 25...Nh3+ 26.g×h3 Q×h3, with roughly equal chances.

24...Qg5!

With a triple threat: the mundane 25...Q×f5, the fatal 25...Q×g2 mate, and 25...Nh3+, winning White's undefended queen. White sees the first two threats, but not the third. Otherwise he might have tried 26.Ne7+ Kh8 27.Be1, although Black would still be winning.

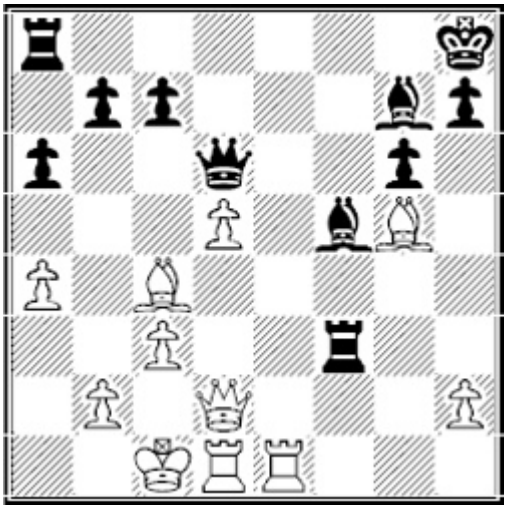
25.Ng3?! Nh3+ 26.Kh2 Q×d2 ... 0-1

Black, helped by his ten-second lead in time, soon converted his massive material advantage.

The element of surprise is very important in bullet. In normal chess, players have time to check out their moves for tactical flaws, but in bullet this is self-defeating in most positions, as there just isn't enough time. Players have to rely on their intuition, and if you are able to prepare surprises against what seem to be routine moves by your opponents, you will have reached a higher level of bullet play.

The question of just how far out of your way you should go to set such traps is another issue with a big psychological component. Risking your position in order to set a trap can obviously be dangerous, while traps that arise naturally are both safer and harder for the opponent to spot.

White (1839) – Black (1941) [B06]



Black is on top, because White has only 12 seconds remaining while Black has 30 seconds. In addition, Black's last move, 19...Qd6, set a nasty trap, but without in any way compromising Black's position.

20.Bh6?

This natural move, aimed at exchanging one of Black's dangerous bishops, was just what Black was hoping for.

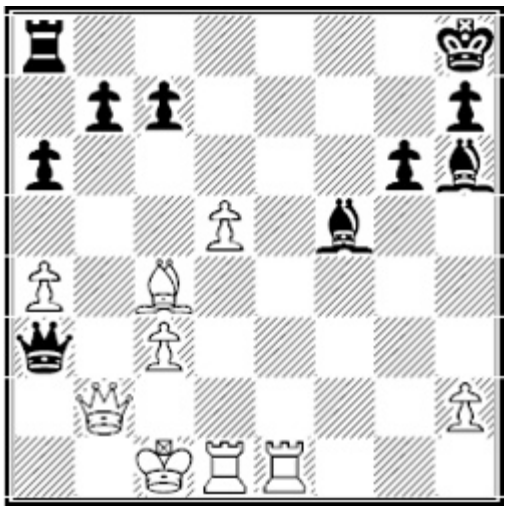
20...R×c3+! 21.b×c3

21.Q×c3 is actually better, but White responds naturally.

21...Qa3+ 22.Qb2 B×h6+ ***(D)***

The point of Black's sacrifice is revealed. Black's g7-bishop occupies the key c1–h6 diagonal, capturing material as it does so. In conflict-resolution terms, this is a win-win result. Well, maybe win-win-lose, if we take White into account...

23.Rd2 Q×b2+?

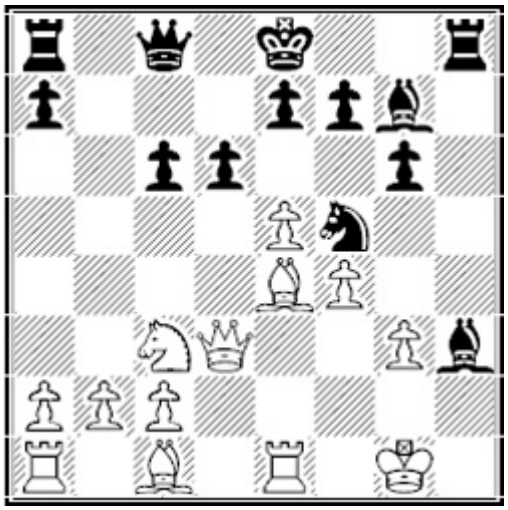


Good enough, but after 23...B×d2+, the carnage is terrible. With 26 seconds left, Black should be ashamed for having missed this possibility, but he wins anyway.

24.K×b2 B×d2 ... 0-1

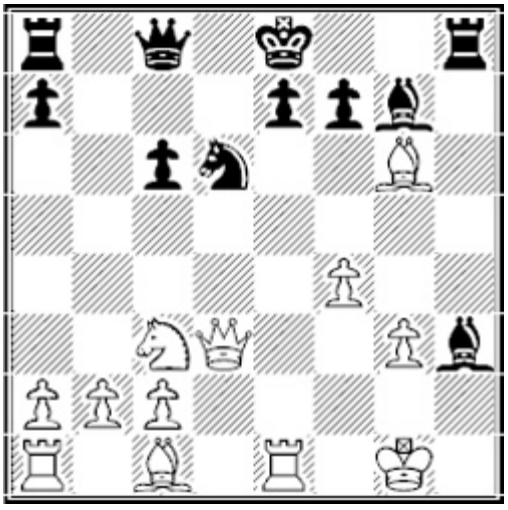
In the previous example, White fell into his opponent's trap by making what appeared to be a perfectly safe move. But sometimes a player tries to be clever and traps himself.

White (2162) – Black (1993) [A40]



Black's lead in development gives him a slight advantage, and because of it White's center is crumbling. White has 37 seconds left, while Black has 35 seconds, so anything can happen. To speed things up, Black sets a trap.

18.e×d6 N×d6!? 19.B×g6?



An apparently strong pawn grab, as after 19...f×g6 20.Q×d6, White threatens 21.Q×e7 mate. We know that in bullet chess the initiative is very important, so White likely felt pretty good about his position, if only for a second or two. After 19...f×g6? White would indeed have the advantage, but Black has a much stronger reply.

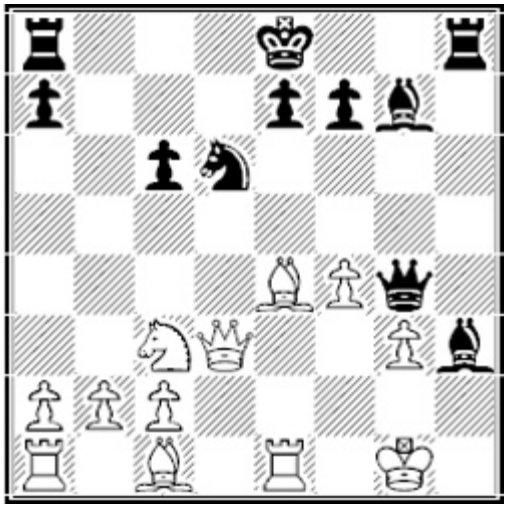
19...Qg4!

An all-purpose move, which attacks White's g6-bishop and prevents 20.Q×d6?, because of the threat of 20...Q×g3+. White answers with the most natural move.

20.Be4 ***(D)***

20...Bd4+! 0-1

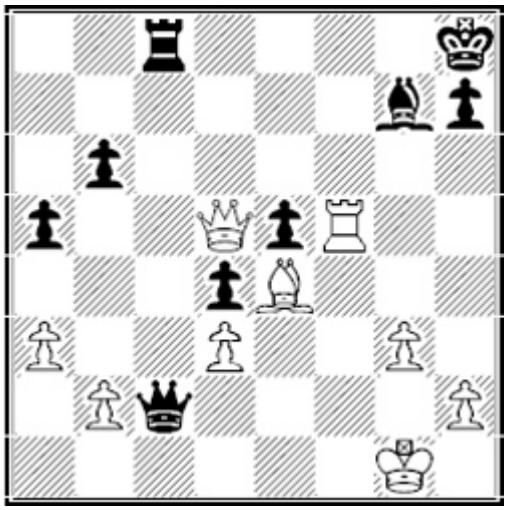
A killing check, as White's g3-pawn falls after both 21.Q×d4, when White's queen is diverted from its defense, and 21.Be3, when White's queen is blocked from the defense of his g3-pawn.



White now let his time run for 24 seconds and forfeited on time rather than resign.

Nimzovich taught us that “the threat is worse than the execution,” and in bullet that is often true. The opponent might find a defense to a direct attack, but a move that sets up multiple threats can cause paralysis, which is fatal in bullet.

White (1974) – Black (1798) [B26]

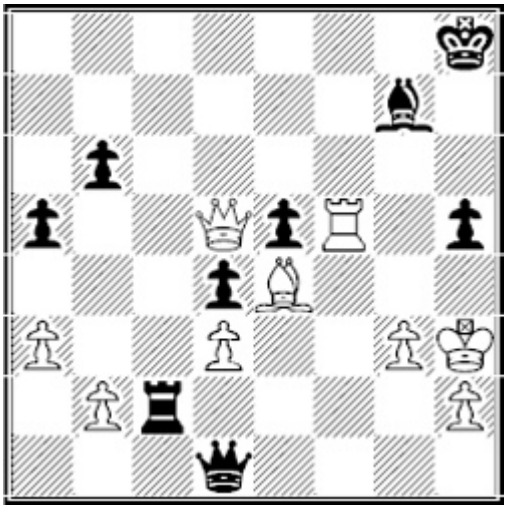


In this position, each player has 33 seconds left and neither player’s king is entirely safe. After 25...Q×b2, followed by 26...Rc1+, the position would be equal. Instead, Black starts checking and the fun begins.

25...Qd1+? 26.Kg2!?

26.Rf1 was good too, but White decides on a kingwalk.

26...Rc2+?! 27.Kh3 h5?



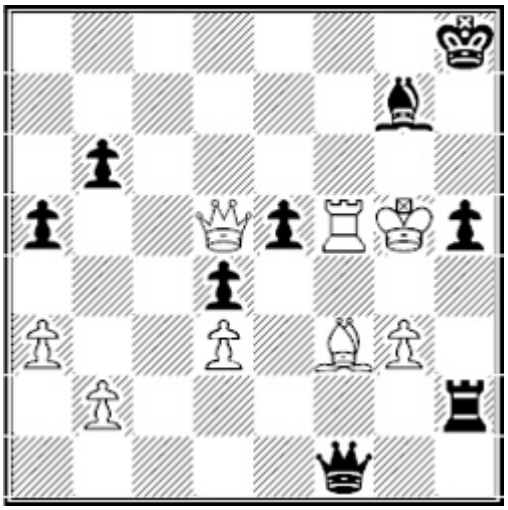
28.Bf3?

Missing 28.Qd8+, with a quick mate.

28...Qf1+

Now Black is slightly better.

29.Kh4 R×h2+ 30.Kg5



Played after a considerable think, as White realizes that the fifth rank is not as safe as he had hoped.

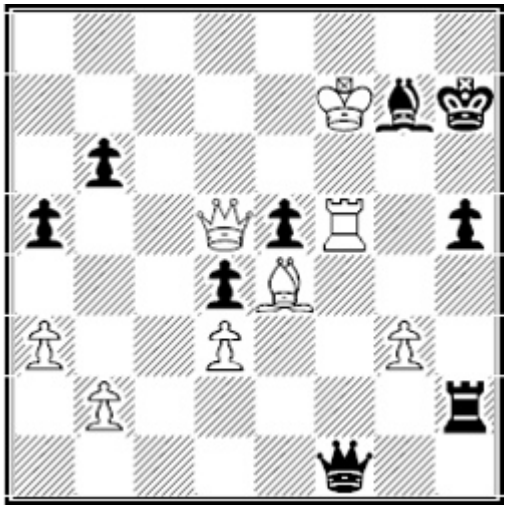
30...Kh7?

Black should continue checking with 30...Qc1+ 31.Kg6 Qh6+ 32.Kf7 Qh7!, with mind-boggling complications, but instead he plays for mate. Black now threatens 30...Qc1+, but White has a crushing response.

31.Be4!

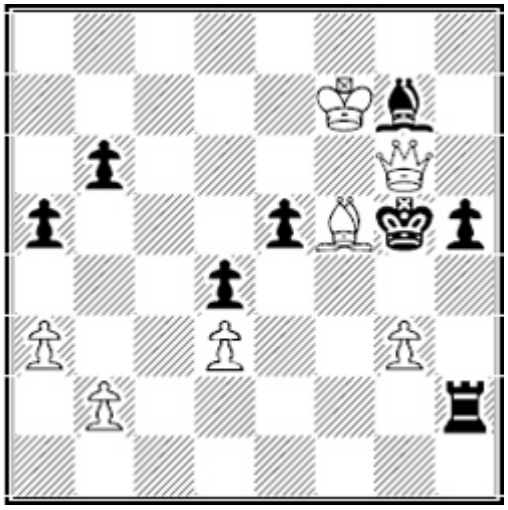
Now 31...Qc1+ is met by 32.Rf4+, and Black never gets to play ...e×f4.

31...Bh6+ 32.Kf6 Bg7+ 33.Kf7



White's strategy, if you can call it that, has triumphed.

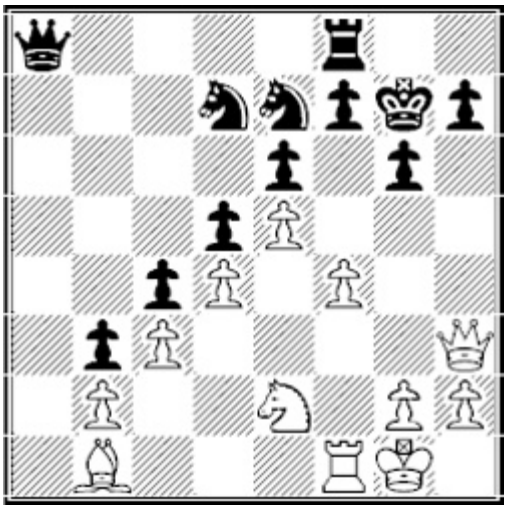
33...Q×f5+ 34.B×f5+ Kh6 35.Qe6+ Kg5 36.Qg6 mate 1-0



With time (six seconds) to spare. Black's king expires on the same square (g5) that White's king recently occupied.

It is always entertaining when the trapper is trapped. In the next example, Black sets a subtle positional trap by appearing to fall for a simple tactic.

White (2154) – Black (1984) [B06]



Each player used 30 seconds to arrive at this strategically tense position. Black has a spatial advantage on the queenside, but White has a dangerous

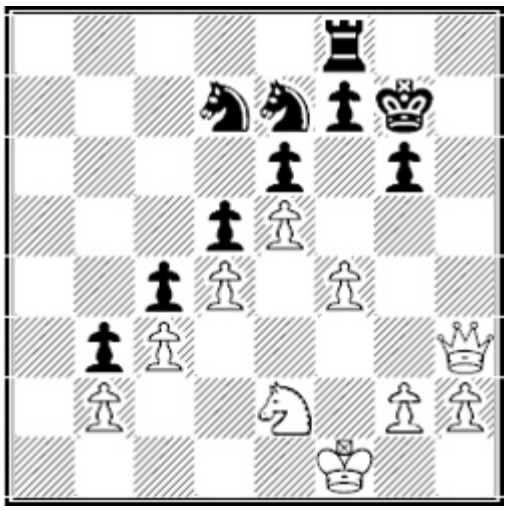
kingside attack brewing. Bearing in mind this is a bullet game, Black makes a positional queen sacrifice.

20...Qa1!? 21.B×g6

Since Black threatens 21...Q×b2, White has little choice but to accept Black's offer, but White probably thought 20...Qa1 was just a blunder, and objectively White's assessment that he will have the advantage is accurate – if he can prove it.

21...Q×f1+ 22.K×f1 h×g6 ***(D)***

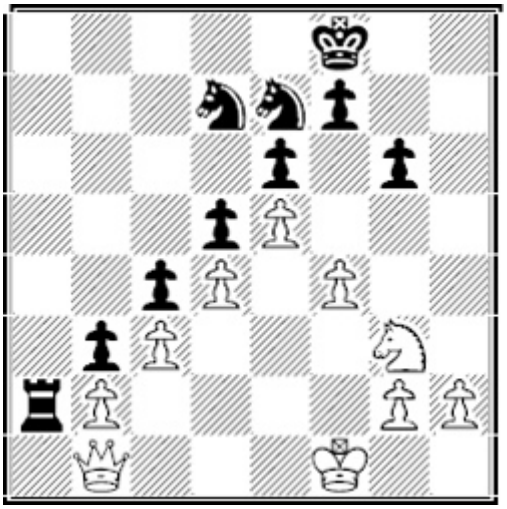
This is the position Black had in mind. White should now fight for the initiative with 23.Qh4 Nf5 24.Qf2, followed by 25.g4; or 23.g4 immediately, but he doesn't adjust to the changed nature of the position quickly enough.



23.Ng3?! Ra8

Black, with a four-second lead in time, tries to force White onto the defensive by invading with his rook.

24.Qg4?! Kf8 25.Qd1 Ra2 26.Qb1



Black’s hopes have been realized. White is defending and Black has 24 seconds remaining, while White has only 18 seconds left.

26...Nb6

Black’s knight heads for a4, in order finish off White’s b2-pawn. To his credit, White avoids immediate collapse.

27.Ne2!? Na4 28.Nc1 R×b2?

This earns a question mark, because Black spent eight seconds on this move, which was both forced and good, so each player now has 14 seconds left.

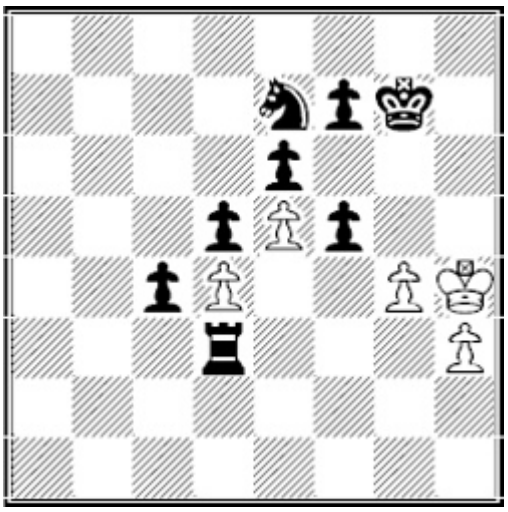
29.Qa1 Rc2 30.Q×a4 R×c1+ 31.Ke2 b2 32.Qa8+ Kg7 33.f5 g×f5

Black could have promoted his b2-pawn, but he gives a higher priority to his king’s safety.

34.Qa2 b1Q 35.Q×b1 R×b1

Black has seven seconds left, to his opponent's three seconds, but White soldiers on.

36.Kf3 Rb2 37.Kg3 Rc2 38.Kh4 R×c3 39.g4 Rd3 40.h3

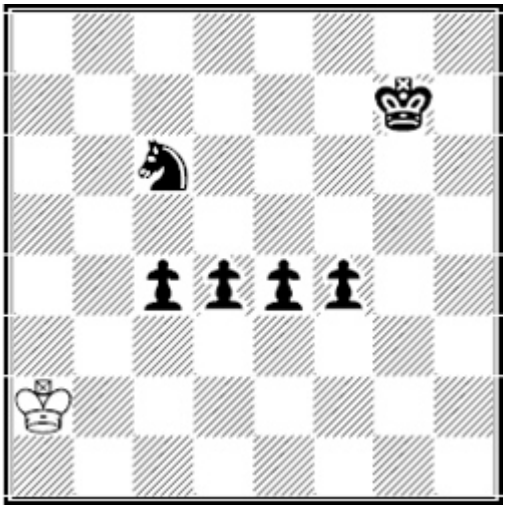


Black now can mate elegantly with 40...Kh6! 41.g5+ (41.g×f5 N×f5 mate) Kh7 42.g6+ Kh6!, followed by 43...Ng6 mate. Black, afraid of stalemates, instead just keeps taking pawns and relies on his time edge (five seconds to two).

40...R×d4 41.Kh5 f×g4 42.h×g4 R×g4 43.K×g4

White now has only one second left, but in an astounding display of speed and tenacity, he hangs on for another seven moves, which leads to another diagram.

43...Ng6 44.Kf3 N×e5+ 45.Ke2 Nc6 46.Kd1 e5 47.Kc1 f5 48.Kb1 e4 49.Ka1 f4 50.Ka2 d4 0-1

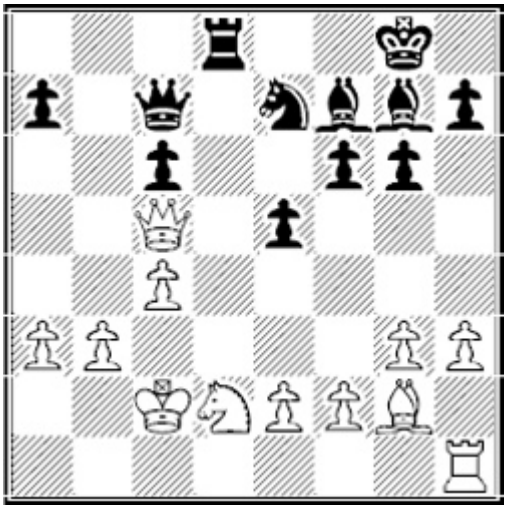


In this picturesque position, Black’s pawn center triumphed with two seconds left, as White finally ran out of time.

Hidden threats are always dangerous. In the next example, Black’s threat is not easy to see.

White (2172) – Black (2146) [A04]

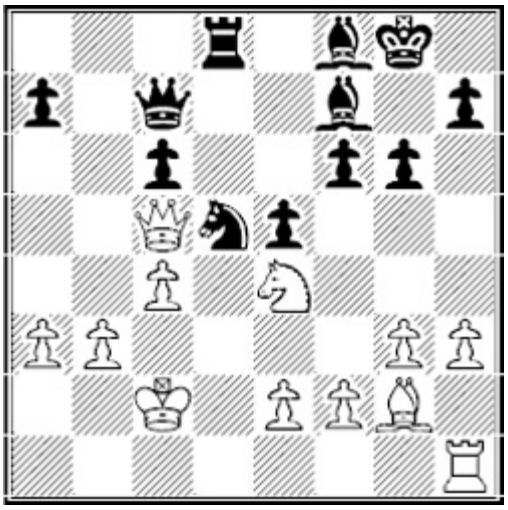
Black is a piece up and has 32 seconds remaining, against White’s 15 seconds. As chess writers like to say, Black “can win as he pleases” – to the extent that is ever possible in bullet. While quick play without any egregious blunders would be bound to lead to victory, Black makes a hidden threat which results in a faster and more elegant win.



25...Bf8!? 26.Ne4?!

This move shouldn’t be criticized too harshly, as White has to do something. He now threatens 27.N×f6+, but Black’s surprising reply even stops this threat.

26...Nd5! 0-1

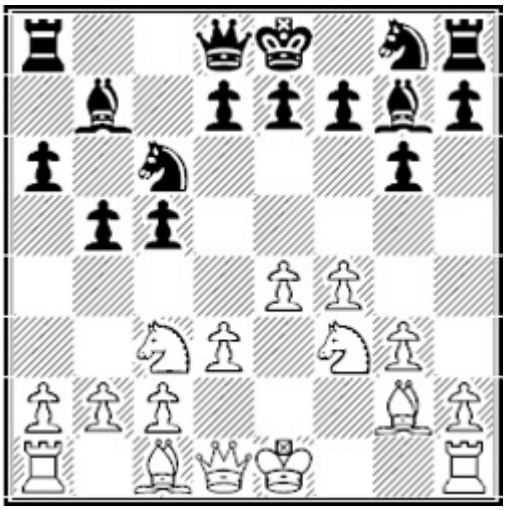


White’s queen is trapped! White resigned.

In the next example, calling White’s threat “hidden” is a bit of a stretch...

White (1989) – Black (2080) [A00]

1.g3 c5 2.Bg2 Nc6 3.d3 a6 4.Nc3 b5 5.e4 Bb7 6.f4 g6 7.Nf3 Bg7



Both sides have played their opening systems, without much regard for their opponent. But now the two armies begin to make contact.

8.h4!?

A typical bullet move, hoping to get the h-pawn to h5 quickly, in every sense of the word. White's logic is that Black may not respond to 8.h4!?, because he is committed (either psychologically or through a pre-move) to some other move.

8...e6 9.h5

Leaving aside the question of whether it's good or not, White has managed to carry out his plan.

9...Nge7 10.h6

To drive Black’s bishop off the long diagonal, although in bullet there’s always a chance White might get to take on g7 if Black has pre-moved...

10...Bf8

10...B×c3+!? was probably safer, although Black is still fine after 10...Bf8.

11.e5

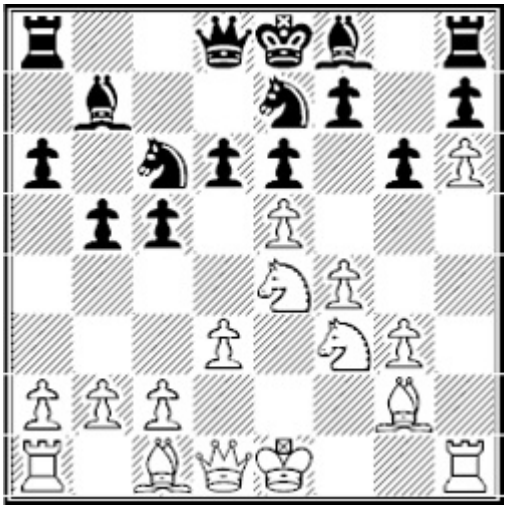
White continues to fight for control of the dark squares. White’s plan shouldn’t really work, but at least it lets him find moves quickly and doesn’t do too much damage to his position.

11...d6?!

The subtle 11...Ng8! was better, covering f6 and d6, and at the same time attacking White’s h6-pawn.

White would then have to abandon his plan of controlling the dark squares, and the game would continue from a more or less equal position. The loss of White’s h6-pawn would hardly be decisive in a bullet game.

12.Ne4



At this point, White has 50 seconds left, while Black has 51 seconds remaining. Black now instantly played the thematic...

12...d×e5?

...overlooking White’s threat, which was hidden in plain sight.

13.Nf6 mate 1-0

Chapter 12

Simplification

One of the most difficult aspects of chess for many players is deciding when to exchange pieces. There is no simple formula, as whether and what to exchange depends on the specific features of each position. We don't intend to address this demanding topic in detail in this chapter, which is why it will be short.

The purpose of exchanging

Once players reach a certain level of understanding, they will at least have heard of the various reasons for exchanging pieces:

- Trades often reduce the opponent's attacking potential, and therefore are advisable if you are defending.
- Bad pieces should be exchanged, just as your opponent's good pieces should be traded off.
- If you have less space, exchanging some pieces may give you more elbow room for the pieces you have left.
- If you're ahead in material, exchanging into an ending will often be the safest, and perhaps only, way to win.

It is easy to find exceptions to all these principles:

- Trading off your best defensive pieces may make your opponent's attack stronger, not weaker. Forcing such exchanges are in fact an

important attacking technique.

- It’s fine to exchange your bad pieces for your opponent’s good ones, but how do you decide which is which? A “bad bishop” may look bad, but may be doing something important, and may later become good. The same might be true of any piece.

- There are so many exceptions to the principle that “the player with less space should exchange pieces” that it’s not clear such a principle really exists at all. You may have less space at one point in the game, but only until you break into the opponent’s possibly over-extended position.

- Exchanging pieces (but usually not pawns) may well give you a winning ending, but there are many exceptions to this principle as well.

So you could write a whole book on this topic, and people have. In the end, it comes down to this: sometimes you should exchange pieces and sometimes you shouldn’t.

Is bullet different?

Bullet chess is still chess, so players with a better understanding of when and how to exchange pieces will always have an advantage in bullet, just as stronger player will always have an advantage over weaker players. That said, there are some special considerations in bullet which should be kept in mind.

The first is that exchanges, because they involve captures, often are amenable to pre-moving. For example, if rooks are opposed on an open file,

it is natural and perfectly safe to pre-move the recapture of your rook, provided you have no better move. If your opponent doesn't exchange, you've lost nothing.

However, you have to be careful if you're the one making the exchange. It can be dangerous to pre-move based on the assumption that your opponent will automatically recapture. Stronger players will look for "in between moves" which defer recaptures, both to exploit ill-advised pre-moves and to throw their opponents off track if no pre-move has been made. For example, after your opponent captures your knight with a bishop he may pre-move thinking you have to recapture his bishop. If you instead attack his queen, the result may be a red-faced opponent who has to play without a queen.

The second, more important, point in bullet is that exchanges can often make it easier to win on time. We have seen that constant pressure and threats can wear down an opponent, either on the board or on the clock (or both), and players can't be faulted for pursuing such a strategy right to the end of the game if it is working. The fact is, though, that not every bullet player is able to maintain this level of play for the entire game.

Fortunately, there are other ways to win in bullet. They are less attractive, but no less effective, than checkmating.

A pugilistic parallel

Let's compare bullet to boxing. It's always fun to win by a knockout (checkmate), and it's almost as satisfying when your opponent doesn't answer the bell at the start of a round (resignation). But if a fight goes the full 15 rounds the judges will decide the outcome, and winning a boxing match even by a split decision counts just as much as a knockout.

If a boxer knows he's ahead on points going into the final rounds, it may be that all he has to do to win the fight is to avoid losing it. It's then enough to break even in the last few rounds, because time is on your side.

As we've discussed in Chapter 3, time can often be decisive in bullet for a number of reasons. Time is the root cause of many mistakes, and therefore can be said to indirectly affect the result in many games. But when players run out of time, time is the direct cause of defeat. A time advantage may therefore be decisive all on its own.

Whether this is so depends both on the size of the time advantage and on the position. A five-second lead in time after four or five moves in an equal position is significant; a time advantage of six seconds to one second in a dull position where nothing much is happening will be decisive. In normal chess the transmutation of advantages from one form to another is an essential element of strategy. This is also true in bullet chess, but advantages on the clock are every bit as important as advantages on the board (sometimes more so), and that's where simplification comes in.

Just as the boxer who is ahead on points wants to avoid having anything interesting happen in the last few rounds, a bullet player who is significantly ahead on time should simplify and deaden the position and run the opponent out of time.

In both cases, the one who is ahead will win unless he is knocked out or checkmated. And in both cases, a competitor who lets his emotions run away with him and tries for a knockout or a beautiful mate might find that he has snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

The Japanese game of Go is famous for its aphorisms. One is “rich men don’t pick quarrels.” If you are far ahead on time, simplify the position as much as you can and don’t start unnecessary fights that you can’t finish.

The other side of the coin

It’s wonderful to cruise to victory with a time edge right from the start, but your opponent has a say in this and you will inevitably find yourself behind on time in some games. It isn’t difficult to draw the right conclusion from the above analysis as to what you should do when you’re behind the temporal eight-ball. In boxing, you start swinging; in hockey you pull your goalie; in golf you shoot for the pin. You get the picture.

If you’re significantly behind in time in bullet, don’t exchange pieces, especially queens. Your only hope is checkmate, and you have to have something left to mate with. This is so obvious that readers may wonder why it is worth mentioning, but there are innumerable examples of players mindlessly exchanging pieces when their opponents have twice as much time as they do. One explanation for this is that players sometimes don’t realize that they are behind on time. There’s not much we can say about that – in bullet you always have to know where you stand on the clock. The more common explanation, though, is that players lapse into a resigned depression and exchange simply because it’s objectively the best continuation on the board.

Get over it! If you wanted to play the best moves all the time, you wouldn’t be playing bullet! We all know that if your opponent opposes rooks on an open file it usually isn’t a good idea to give up control of the file just to avoid exchanging, but if you’re down ten or 15 seconds on time your only chance may be to keep the rooks on the board so you can attack.

Bullet is not for the faint at heart. It’s not always possible to play safe. If your only chance is mate, then keep those chances alive, even if it means giving ground to your opponent. If you’re lucky, you’ll be playing someone who hasn’t read this book, and things may turn out fine in the end.

Endings

If you’re ahead on time, simplifying to an ending – even one which is losing on the board – may be the simplest and safest path to victory. If the ending is better for you, you will be safe unless you blunder. If the ending is worse for you, everything may still be fine, depending on how many moves your opponent has to make to mate and how quickly he or she can make them.

Once you get to an ending, a material advantage of a single pawn is often enough to win. The classic description of how to convert a pawn advantage to a win in an ending goes something like this:

- Put your piece(s) on their best squares.
- Centralize your king.
- Create a passed pawn by advancing your pawn majority.
- If your opponent stops your passed pawn with a piece, attack the piece with your king and win it.
- If your opponent stops your passed pawn with his king, attack his pawns on the other side of the board with your king and win more pawns.

The advice usually stops there. Unless there are so few pawns remaining that an extra piece won't do the job, the defender can safely resign.

In bullet, however, a few more steps must be added:

- Once you've won your opponent's piece, use your extra piece to take more pawns.
- Create another passed pawn and get a queen.
- Hunt down and checkmate the enemy king.

Pretty obvious stuff, but these last three steps might take another 15 or 20 moves. Just how long it will take to make those moves depends on how much resistance the defender can still offer and how quickly the player with the advantage can move.

Let's put it this way – there is a big difference between a winning bullet ending and a won one. Like everything thing else in bullet, a winning position is worth nothing, while a won position is worth a full point. If there isn't enough time to convert an advantage, then there really is no advantage, which is why "lost" bullet endings may well be winning, depending on the clock.

Conclusions

The principles relating to simplification in bullet are themselves fairly simple, although many bullet players are either unaware of them or forget about them in the heat of battle.

If you’re significantly ahead on time, trade pieces and try to get to an ending.

Conversely, if you’re significantly behind on time, keep the pieces on the board and play for complications.

Perhaps the hardest aspect of simplification to grasp is that these principles often apply even if the resulting position is objectively bad. A “losing” ending is a win if the opponent runs out of time and you have even one pawn left.

This brings us to our next chapter, which deals with bullet endings. A word of caution is necessary – in bullet chess endings, not everything is as it seems. Because time is almost always a factor by the time an ending is reached, much of what you know about endings will no longer apply....

Chapter 13

Bullet Endings

Chess endings are often interesting and difficult, and many books have been written on the subject. In some ways, endgame play has become something of a lost art, because of faster time controls and the increased importance of opening theory and memorization. As the opportunities to “just play chess” disappear, endgame skill diminishes in importance.

Nevertheless, many still believe that endgames are important, and that a true understanding of the powers of the pieces must come through a study of endgames. With fewer pieces on the board, the strengths and weaknesses of each piece are displayed more vividly, and thus endgame study helps players comprehend tactics, positional strategies and even openings.

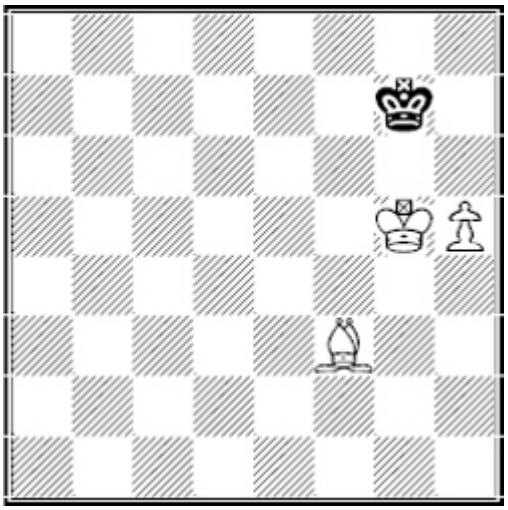
In this chapter, we will focus on how endings are different in bullet chess, and how this affects the way they should be approached. We assume a basic knowledge of chess endings on the part of the reader, and will not involve ourselves too much in endgame theory.

It’s self-evident that in bullet endings time is very important. Anyone questioning this proposition should review the laws of thermodynamics. In games with increments, a player may gain time on the clock with each move, but in one-minute chess both players will always have less time than when they started the game, and at no stage in the game is time more important than in the endgame.

In many bullet games, the outcome will be decided purely by the clock. This is not nearly so common earlier in the game, where checkmate is usually a possibility and speed alone isn't sufficient. It follows that in bullet endings pre-moving is often essential, and we have already seen several examples of pre-moving calamities in endings in Chapter 5.

Before turning to this subject, however, it is important to realize that the assessment of many endgame positions is fundamentally different in bullet. A few examples are appropriate.

Consider the following position:



Most players know that this position is drawn, because Black's king runs to h8 and prevents White's h-pawn from promoting. White's bishop, being "the wrong color," cannot control h8, and any attempt to constrict the movement of Black's king will only result in stalemate. In normal chess, most players would agree to a draw in the diagrammed position.

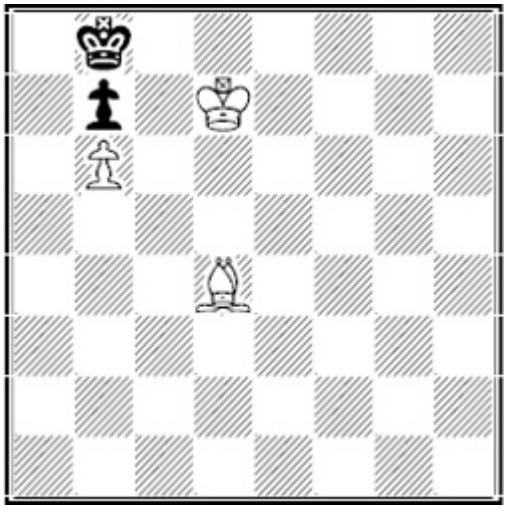
In bullet, however, the assessment of this position depends completely on the time remaining to each player. White can't lose because Black has no

material with which to mate, so if White runs out of time, the game is drawn. But if Black runs out of time, White wins. The fact that White can't promote his h-pawn against the best defense is irrelevant. As long as White has a pawn, he is considered to have sufficient material to mate (the White bishop, on its own, would not be enough).

But this is not to say that if White has a time advantage, he automatically wins, because there is another way for Black to draw – the 50-move rule. According to the laws of chess, if 50 moves are played without a capture or a pawn move, the game is drawn. This rule, which is seldom invoked in normal chess, is meant to prevent endless, pointless play. This type of play is quite acceptable in bullet, but that makes the 50-move rule that much more important, because it means that the defender may have to make 50 moves without losing on time before claiming a draw.

This can be very difficult, because the defender may have very little time left before reaching such a position, and only exceptionally fast players can make 50 moves in less than ten seconds. Black's defensive task is even harder than that, though, because in the diagrammed position White can advance his h-pawn just before the move count hits 50, so that the count starts again.

But the 50-move limit applies to White as well, as shown in the next example.



This is a theoretically drawn position on the board, because White's bishop cannot capture Black's b7-pawn, and Black's king cannot be forced away from the corner. Black's fortress is far from secure in bullet, though, where the outcome will depend largely on how much time the players have left. Even then there are some nuances.

At first glance, it appears that if White has a time advantage, he will win provided Black runs out of time before the 50-move rule takes effect. White cannot advance his b6-pawn or capture Black's b7-pawn, so it seems there is nothing White can do to change the equation. Either Black can make 50 moves before he runs out of time or he can't.

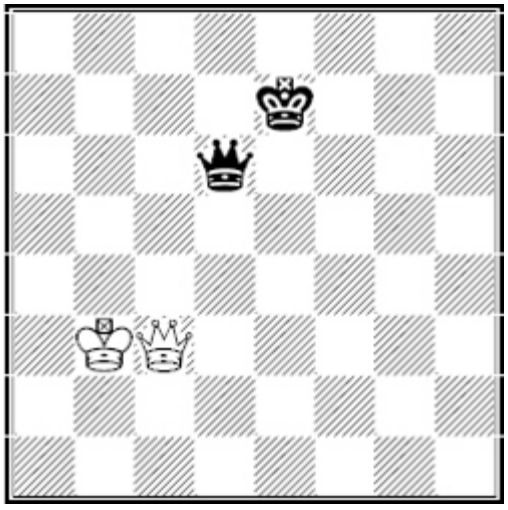
In fact, White can force Black to make nearly a hundred moves to draw by playing 1.Bf4+ Ka8 2.Bb8! at the right moment, forcing Black to capture with 2...K×b8, which starts the 50-move count again. This is not the sort of idea you will find in any endgame book!

Conversely, if Black has a time advantage he has a chance to win, because White can't capture Black's last pawn. Should this be a concern for White, he should play to stalemate Black by forcing his king into the corner. If

White’s king were not on d7, conceivably Black could try to win by bringing his king into the center, in the hope that White might run out of time before he could capture Black’s b7-pawn with his king. Black wouldn’t be risking anything if White was sure to run out of time even if he managed to capture Black’s last pawn, as the game would still be drawn. It would, however, be embarrassing for Black to lose this position if he was ahead on time!

This example shows that even “simple” bullet endings can be tricky, because of the time factor. Bullet players often must make difficult decisions whether to play for a win or draw, and misjudgments can result in a loss.

In the next example, White is to move. What should White play?



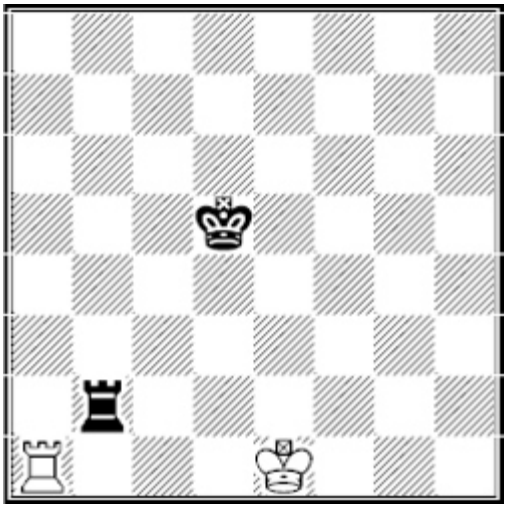
The answer depends mostly on how much time the players have left, and partly on White’s personality.

If White were about to run out of time, 1.Qb4! would force the exchange of queens. There would be almost nothing Black could do to avoid the draw,

other than to try to block a possible pre-move by White with the risky 1...Qc5?!, which wouldn't accomplish anything unless White was on the verge of running out of time. After 2.Q×c5+, Black could no longer win, and might even lose.

If White were ahead on time, though, then he should start checking with 1.Qg7+, and try to keep the queens on the board for as long as possible. Unless Black could last 50 moves, exchange queens or play faster than White, White's time advantage would be decisive. Pride and sportsmanship of course play no role in this analysis.

Here is the one and only quiz in this entire book: White, to move, has six seconds left and can make four moves per second; Black has eight seconds left and can make three moves per second. What should White play?



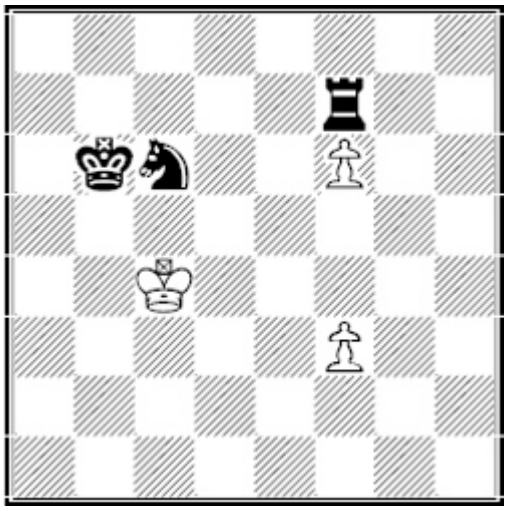
Quiz Position 1

(Solution at the end of this chapter)

Win, lose or draw?

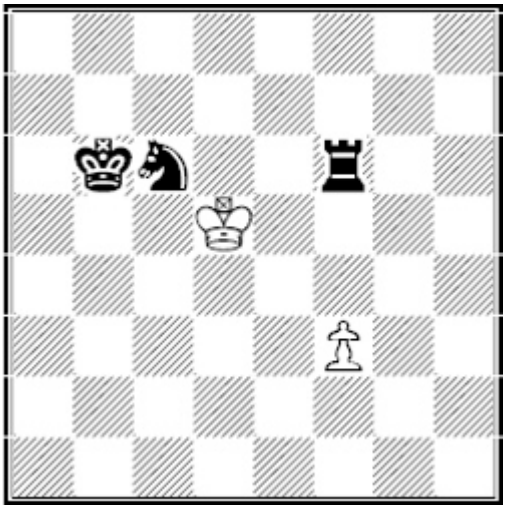
As we have seen, things are not always what they seem in bullet, because the time situation is so important. This can be seen in our next example.

White (2192) – Black (2141) [A40]



With White to move, the position on the board is obviously winning for Black, but in fact Black is in great danger of losing because he has less than a second remaining (White has nine seconds, but that doesn't really matter). The challenge for Black is to eliminate White's last two pawns, and he must pre-move to do so. Black's first pre-move is obvious: 58...R×f6. This is a "safe" pre-move, because White's f6-pawn can't move and can't be defended.

58.Kd5 R×f6



So far so good, but now Black has a difficult choice to make, as he only has time for one more (pre-)move. If White plays 59.f4, then 59...R×f4 is right; if White moves his king, then 59...R×f3 secures the draw.

Black has to guess...

59.f4 1-0

Black lost on time, as he guessed incorrectly and his attempted pre-move of 59...R×f3 was blocked by White's f4-pawn. White therefore kept his last pawn and won. Of course it's easy to know what to do for Black if you know what White will play. The game theory paradigm for this type of position is rock-paper-scissors, although the "game" here is even simpler, because each side has only two, rather than three, choices. The outcome is determined either by psychology or by luck.

A stronger Black player would have pre-moved 59...R×f4 and drawn, but why? Let's look at the position from each player's point of view. For Black, White's last pawn is on f3, and the instinctive reaction is to take it. 59.Ke4 Rf4+ 60.K×f4 would be too bizarre to contemplate, and in any case it

would then take Black another two moves (...Nd4×f3) to capture White's f3-pawn. By pre-moving 59...R×f3, Black has the option of taking White's f4-pawn "manually", so to speak, although it turned out he didn't have time to do so.

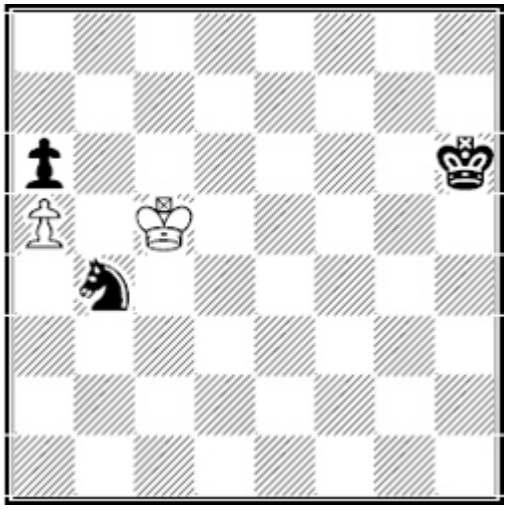
For White, as for most people, the natural inclination is to act by moving his pawn to f4, rather than just letting Black capture it on f3. When under stress, people usually feel better if they do something. 59.f4 might be considered a last (and successful!) act of defiance in an objectively lost position.

A better understanding of psychology, psychic powers (which the top bullet players seem to have) or dumb luck would have led Black to play 59...R×f4!, with a draw.

In any case, White made the right move and won. Isn't that what chess is all about?

In the next example, the pre-moving possibilities are quite complicated, even though the position itself is fairly simple.

White (1949) – Black (1917) [E76]



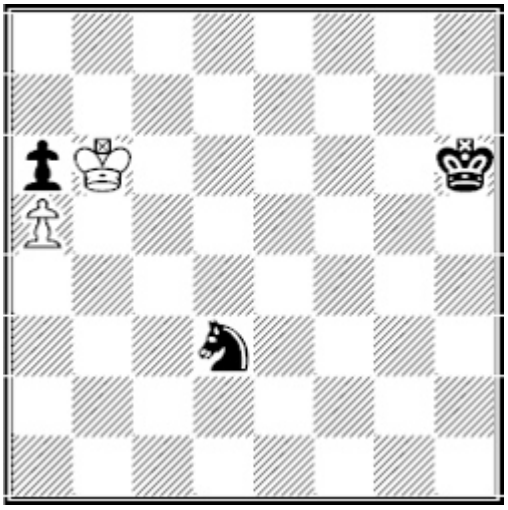
After an eventful game which doesn’t bear close examination, the players have arrived at a theoretically drawn position. White threatens to take Black’s knight, and if it moves, White attacks Black’s a6-pawn with his king. If Black defends his a6-pawn with his knight, White’s king returns to attack it, and once Black moves his knight, White again attacks Black’s a6-pawn, forcing a repetition. But there is more to the position than what’s happening on the board.

Black has two seconds left, while White has less than a second. That means White has to get rid of Black’s last pawn in three or four moves, at most. With this in mind, Black should definitely be playing to win. His next move, which doesn’t give away anything, is good.

48...Nd3+!

This move, which forces a repetition of the position, might well win without further ado because White could run out of time. But White is ready with a pre-move and passes the first test.

49.Kb6



49...Ne5?

A terrible move. White immediately concedes the draw, when he has absolutely no chance of losing. Even if White found a way to take Black's knight, he would have to then capture Black's a6-pawn, move his king out of the way, queen his pawn, then mate Black. It might have been that Black was worried about losing on time himself, but that was very unlikely unless Black froze.

The right move was to repeat the position with 49...Nb4. Then, after 50.Kc5, the position in the previous diagram again arises. Black then has two equally promising ideas. The first is to (pre-)move 50...Kg7, forcing White to capture Black's knight with 51.K×c5. 50...Kg7 should satisfy even a purist (and no bullet player can afford to be), because Black's king gets to c8 in time and the position is still drawn on the board, so 50...Kg7 keeps the on-board draw in hand. However, White would have likely not have had time to play K×b4-c5-b6×a6.

An even crueler alternative was 50...Nd5!, preventing 50.Kb6. The road to the draw on the board is then 51.K×d5, followed by Kc5-b6×a6. This is the

same number of moves as in the previous variation, when White captures Black's knight on b4, but the point of 50...Nd5! is that Black anticipates (and blocks) two possible pre-moves: 51.Kb6 and 51.Kb4, leaving only 51.K×d5 as the right pre-move. White might have pre-moved 51.K×d5 as a result of divine inspiration, but it is more likely that 50...Nd5! would have cost White several tenths of a second, which would have been decisive.

50.K×a6 Nd7 51.Kb7 Nb8 52.a6 Kg6 ½-½

Drawn, as White ran out of time and Black had no material to mate. But it is doubtful whether White could have managed to make even three moves after 50...Nd5!

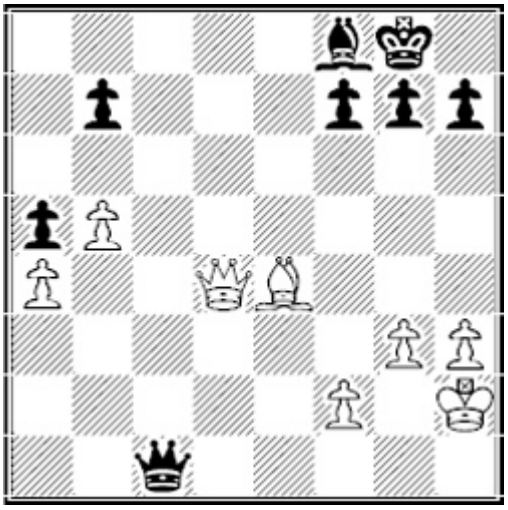
Draws that aren't

We have already seen that objectively drawn positions might well be winning for one side or the other because of time. It isn't necessary to look at theoretically drawn positions to illustrate this principle. Its most common application is in opposite-colored bishop endings.

We all learn early on that endings with opposite-colored bishops tend to be drawn. Absent a significant material advantage (often a single pawn isn't enough) or a radical imbalance in the pawn structure, a draw is almost certain.

Paradoxically, in bullet opposite-colored bishop endings are almost always decisive, because the player who has less time has no way to exchange all the pawns or otherwise force a draw.

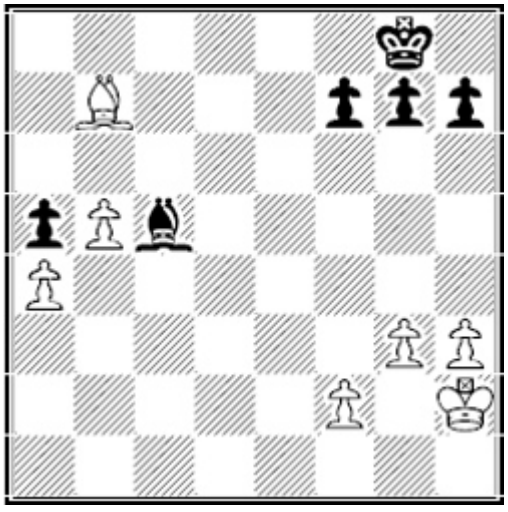
White (2013) – Black (2117) [A00]



In this position, White has a slight pull on the board but a greater advantage in time: 22 seconds to 18 seconds. Faced with this temporal deficit, and perhaps concerned about his king's safety, Black makes two mistakes. He offers a trade of queens, and (even worse) he takes six seconds to do so.

He might just as well have resigned.

27...Qc5? 28.Q×c5 B×c5 29.B×b7 ... 1-0



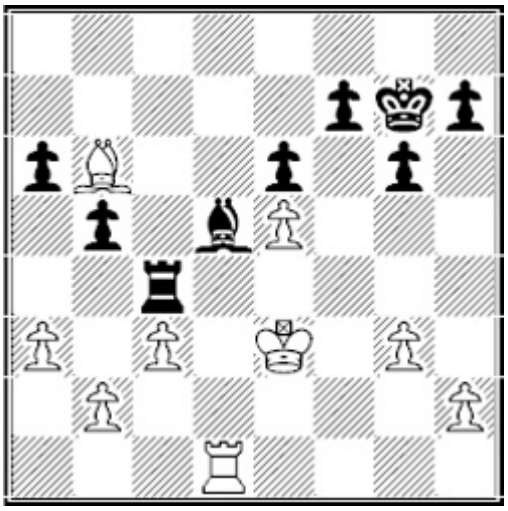
With an eight-second time advantage, White simply ran out the clock on his opponent by making meaningless moves on the light squares. Black may

have counted on his speed, but in the end he lost the race by four seconds.

This is not to say that opposite-colored bishop endings are completely mindless, especially when there are other pieces on the board. After all, there are other ways to avoid losing besides forcing a draw...

White (1746) – Black (1910) [B06]

On the board, the position is equal, and neither side can realistically expect to make progress. On the clock, though, White has 19 seconds remaining and Black has a colossal 40 seconds. This gives Black a decisive advantage. Black can win by just playing moves, although it is likely that White will make a mistake because he has to move quickly.



White’s only chance is to conjure up something on the board.

25.Rd4?

It is fair to call this a blunder, because without the rooks on the board, White has no chance to save the game.

25...Rc6?

This move is so bad it’s hard to know where to begin in commenting on it.

25...R×d4! was correct, because the simplest and safest winning plan is to trade rooks and run White out of time. Tedious and disgraceful? In one sense, but 25...R×d4! is effective too, and this is bullet chess, not chess!

Keeping the rooks on the board is fundamentally wrong, but if Black isn’t willing to exchange with 25...R×d4!, then he should at least keep White’s rook under observation by leaving his rook at c4 and simply bring his king to the center with 25...Kf8.

25...Rc6? lets White’s rook move along the fourth rank and even drives White’s bishop to a better square. 25...Rc8 would at least have prevented White’s next move.

Objectively speaking, Black is still in reasonable shape after 25...Rc6?, but it is always bad to give the opponent unnecessary counterplay, which can turn into threats and worse.

26.Bd8!

White’s bishop heads for f6, where something good might happen. But he has to hurry, because after this move he has less than 15 seconds remaining, so the time discrepancy is even greater than before.

But if we have learned anything, it is that in bullet chess you should never resign because a saving miracle might lie just around the next corner...

26...Rc8?!

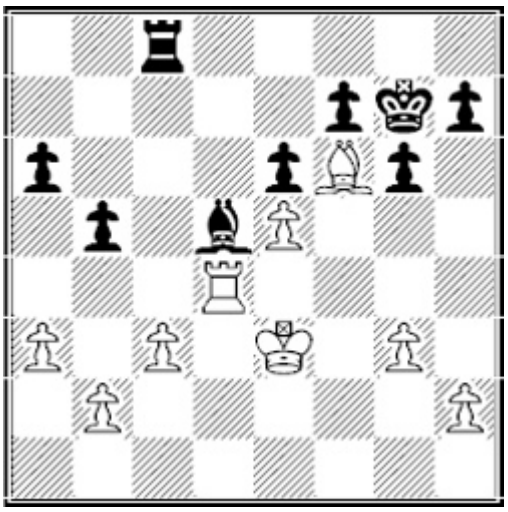
It is becoming apparent that Black is oblivious to the dangers in the position, as otherwise he would have played 26...h6, 26...h5, or (safest of all) 26...Rc4!, keeping an eye on White's rook.

27.Bf6+ ***(D)***

27...Kh6?

An inexcusable error given that Black had 35 seconds left. The possibility that there might be any danger in the position just didn't occur to Black.

28.Rb4?



Apparently the possibility didn't occur to White either since he misses his one golden opportunity – 28.Rh4 mate! This is an instructive error. With only 13 seconds remaining, White has no hope of overcoming his time deficit. Even a series of pre-moves can't save him – his only chance is checkmate. In "hopeless" positions of this sort the only option, other than to resign, is to hope your opponent gets with the program and cooperates. Here Black did, and White should have been alert to the possibility.

28...g5

Black at least ensures that White has only one chance to mate! The game now resumed its natural course, and after another ten moves White ran out of time.

29.Kd4 ... 0-1

Playing for mate

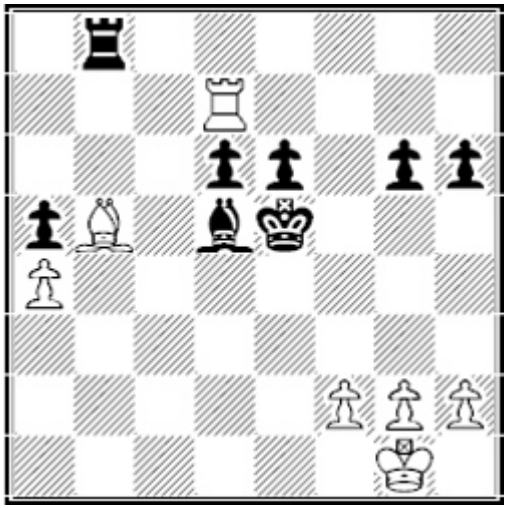
The mate in the previous example fell into White's lap from nowhere as a gift from the gods (or at least from his opponent), but a very important principle in bullet endings is to play for mate, for several reasons.

Just as in other phases of bullet games, direct threats are often worth making. They may work, and even if they don't, they will probably slow your opponent down.

Mate threats are also more likely to succeed in the ending than during the middle game because they will usually be unexpected. Players often switch into "ending mode" and think about material and promoting pawns rather than king safety, especially since it's natural to activate your king during an ending.

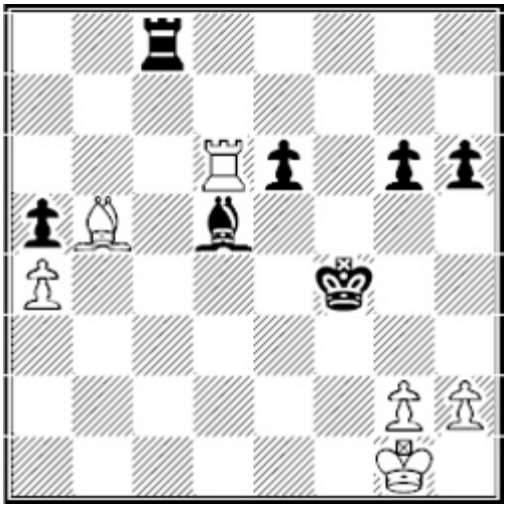
Finally, a mating attack may well be faster than winning conventionally. Where time is an issue, as it normally is in the ending, this can be very important.

White (1825) – Black (1956) [B06]



White is a pawn down, but has 18 seconds left, to Black's 14 seconds. Are four seconds worth a pawn? Who knows, but White should defend tenaciously and hope that his extra four seconds pay off. Instead he tries too hard to simplify the position, and in doing so gives Black a clear winning plan.

34.f4+?! K×f4 35.R×d6 Rc8!



White has increased his time advantage to five seconds, but Black now plays for mate, and if he is successful, time won't matter.

36.Ra6

White doesn’t realize the danger, but it is already difficult to defend, especially in bullet.

36...Ke3

36...Rc1+ was more precise.

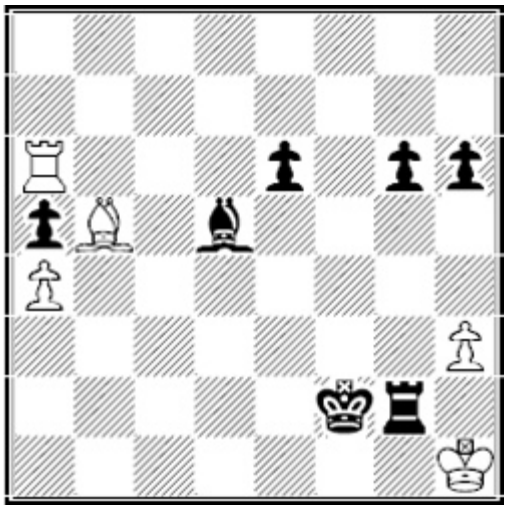
37.h3 Rc2

Again, 37...Rc1+ was more accurate, but White either fails to see the threat or fails to notice the defensive try 38.Bf1 (a backwards diagonal move), although this fails to 38...Rc1.

38.Kh2

Now Black has a forced mate, which he sees.

38...R×g2+ 39.Kh1 Kf2!



Much stronger than any of the discovered checks.

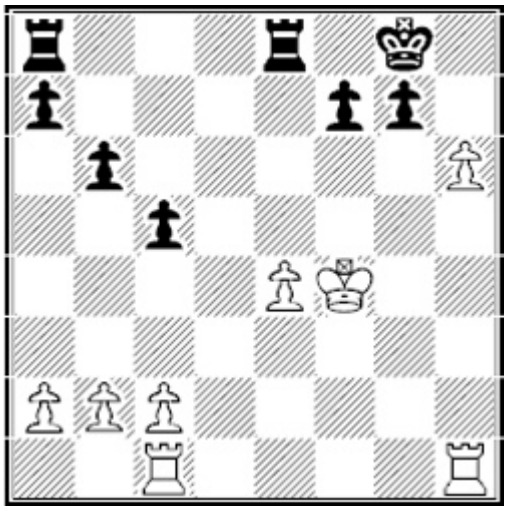
40.R×e6

Only now does White realize the danger to his king, but it's too late. Black just ignores White's e6-rook.

40...Rg1+! 41.Kh2 Rh1 mate 0-1

Mate threats in the ending can be disguised and often catch the opponent unawares, as in the following example.

White (2115) – Black (1984) [A00]



Queens have just been traded on f4, and while Black can take some comfort in having defused White's kingside attack, he has problems. White has an active king and a significant lead in time (32 seconds left to Black's 20 seconds).

Black should either take the d-file with 26...Rad8 or rid himself of White's dangerous h6-pawn with 26...g×h6. In both cases Black would have objectively sufficient play, although the time differential would remain a

problem since the double rook ending could go on and on without anything happening other than Black's time trouble getting worse.

The game took a different course.

26...g6?! 27.Rcd1 Rad8 28.Rd5!

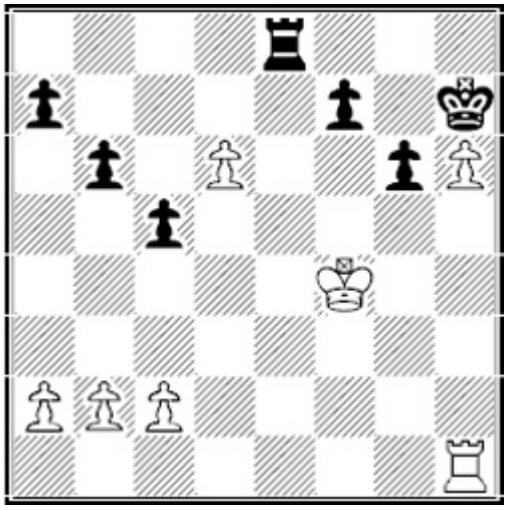
A strong positional move, which can still count for something in bullet! White occupies the outpost on the d-file, and if Black captures White's d5-rook, White gets a dangerous passed d-pawn.

Alternatively 28...f5 29.R×d8 R×d8 30.e5 gives White a dangerous passed e-pawn. Black therefore shouldn't force matters, but in bullet it is often very difficult to find "waiting moves."

In any case, Black is irresistibly drawn to the most natural move even though it is bad, and soon finds that his problems are getting worse. With 17 seconds left, White's prospects for victory are increasingly good.

28...R×d5?! 29.e×d5 Kh7 30.d6?! ***(D)***

Pushing passed pawns is often a good idea in bullet, but objectively 30.d6 is bad, because after the careful 30...f6!,



White’s king cannot support his d-pawn. The reason we give 30.d6 a “?!” rather than simply a question mark is because it causes Black to panic. This psychological aspect of 30.d6 has to be considered when evaluating the move.

After the superior 30.Rh2!, keeping Black’s rook off the seventh rank, followed by 31.c4, securely defending White’s passed d5-pawn, Black would have been in trouble both on the board and on the clock.

30...Re6?

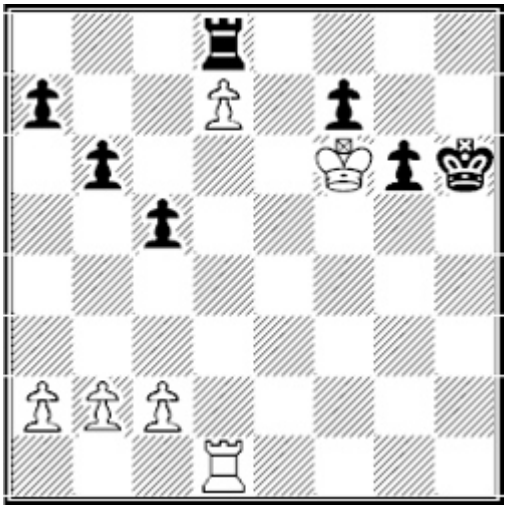
Threatening to go behind White’s d-pawn (31.d7? Rd6), but White doesn’t allow this. Black may have anticipated the sequence of moves which occurs in the game, reasoning that diverting White’s rook to the d-file would cost White his h6-pawn. He’s right, but that’s not the end of the story.

31.Rd1! Re8 32.d7 Rd8 33.Ke5

The penetration of White’s king into Black’s position decides the game.

33...K×h6 34.Kf6 ***(D)***

34...g5?



Black, having seen that he would have to give up his rook for White's d-pawn after 35.Ke7, rested his faint hopes in the advance of his kingside pawns, which might confuse or alarm White. A few wasted tempos by the rook and who knows?

But what Black overlooked was that White had kept in mind the important principle in bullet endings that checkmate ends the game, thereby solving all the difficult technical problems associated with winning a won position.

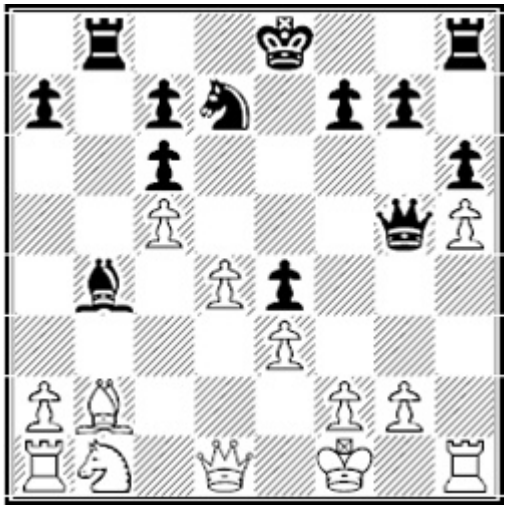
35.Rh1 mate 1-0

In the next example, Black obtains a favorable ending against a "bullet opening." In his haste to create counterplay, White forgets he has a king and succumbs to a surprise mating attack.

White (2367) – Black (2964) [A00]

1.h4 d5 2.h5 e5 3.b3 h6 4.Bb2 Nc6 5.e3 Nf6 6.Bb5 Bd6 7.Nf3 Qe7 8.d4 e4 9.Ne5 Bd7 10.N×d7 N×d7 11.c4 Bb4+ 12.Kf1 d×c4 13.b×c4 Qg5

14.B×c6 b×c6 15.c5 Rb8

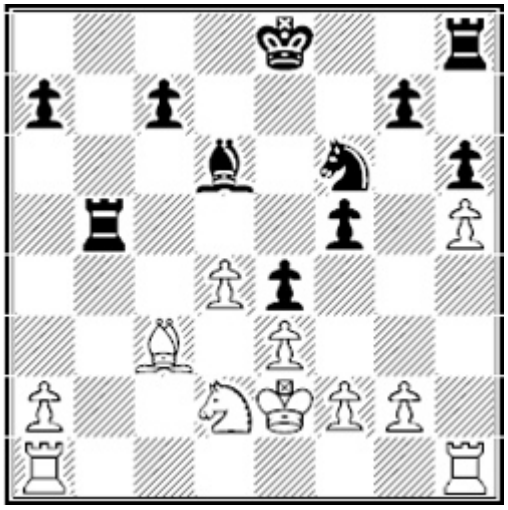


16.Qa4?

A bad blunder after a rather dubious opening. 16.Bc3 and 16.Qc2 were both much better.

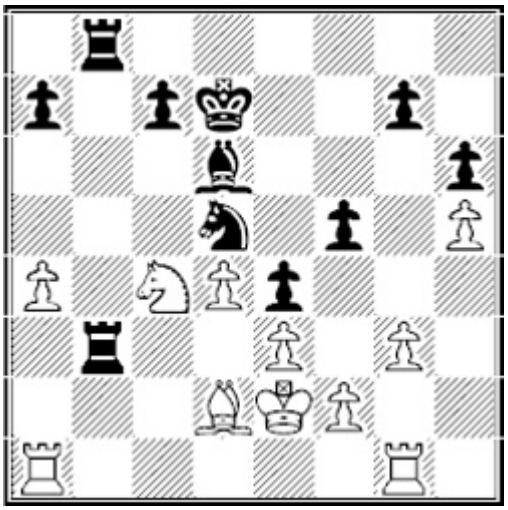
White was probably all set to go after Black's b4-bishop, as he played 16.Qa4? in less than a second. Apart from the fact that White is attacking a piece that Black just defended with 15...Rb8, 16.Qa4? allows Black's b4-bishop to escape.

16...B×c5! 17.Bc3 Bd6 18.Q×c6 Qb5+ 19.Q×b5 R×b5 20.Nd2 f5 21.Ke2 Nf6



White has come out of the opening with a reasonable position and even time on the clock (each player has 40 seconds left). It is quite clear, however, that the effects of 1.h4 and 2.h5 will be felt in the ensuing endgame.

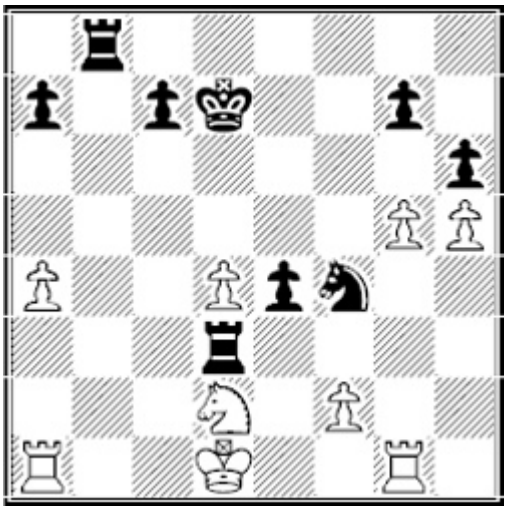
22.a4 Rb8 23.Nc4 Nd5 24.Bd2 Kd7 25.g3 Rb3 26.Rhg1 Rhb8



Despite a likely feeling of general dissatisfaction with the course of the game since the opening, White has kept his cool up to this point and is only down three seconds on the clock with half a minute left.

Here, however, White goes for broke in an attempt to open up the position.

27.g4 f4 28.e×f4 B×f4 29.g5 B×d2 30.N×d2 Nf4+ 31.Kd1 Rd3



32.g×h6?

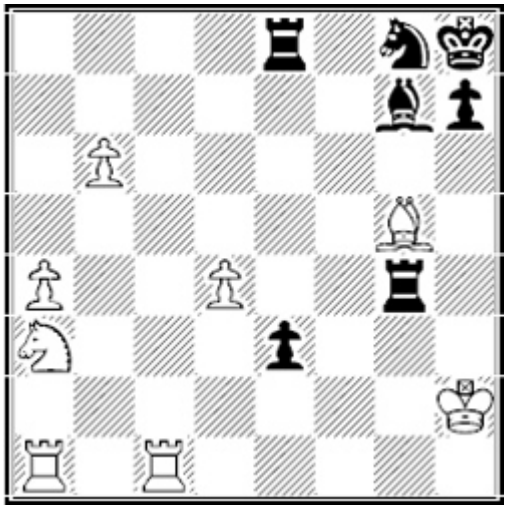
A rather inexplicable move, for which White used three seconds. After 32.Kc2 White would have stood worse, but there would be no forced win for Black. After the unfortunate 32.g×h6?, the game ends rather abruptly.

32...Rb2 0-1

White loses his knight, then his king.

The ending in the next example has many characteristics of a middle game. Black has been playing for mate and continues to do so despite the absence of queens.

White (1985) – Black (2033) [A40]

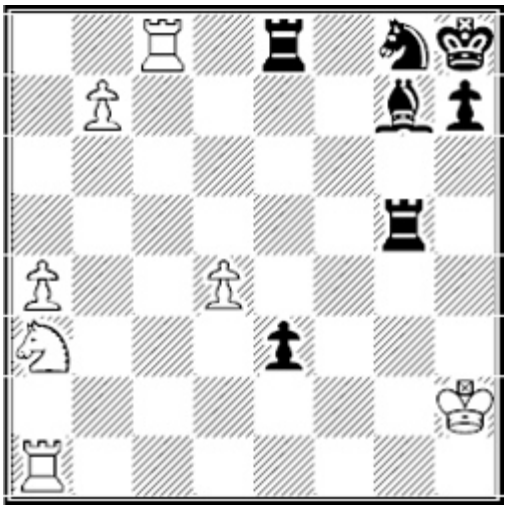


Black's last move was 35...R(g3)×g4, attacking White's g5-bishop. Black has 14 seconds left, while White has 22 seconds. White has a decision to make.

36.b7?!

36.Rg1! was equal, but White decides to stake everything on his advanced b-pawn. Such an all-or-nothing approach is not necessarily a bad idea in bullet, but Black has his own ideas, so the play becomes very sharp.

36...R×g5 37.Rc8



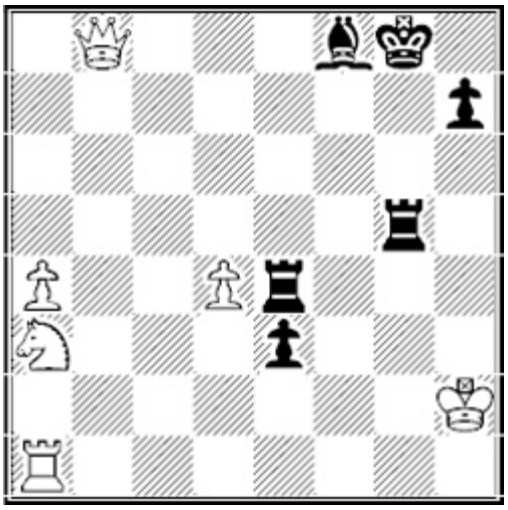
37...Re4?!

While this leads to a pretty finish, here Black missed a truly beautiful win with 37...Be5+! 38.d×e5 Re6!, with the unstoppable threat of ...Rh6 mate (38.Kh3 Re6 39.Kh4 Bf4! doesn't help). The main point of 37...Be5+! is that Black's g7-bishop interferes with the operation of his g5-rook so that by sacrificing the bishop, Black is able to reply to 39.R×g8+ with 39...R×g8.

If nothing else, this missed opportunity illustrates that even in bullet direct threats (37...Re4?! threatens 38...Rh4 mate) aren't always best.

Black now has seven seconds left.

38.R×g8+ K×g8 39.b8Q+ Bf8

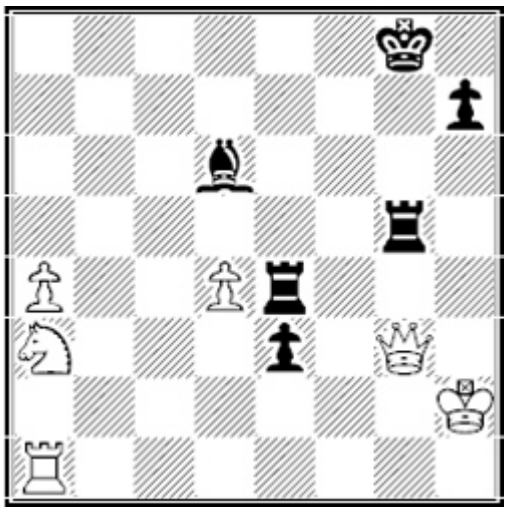


When he played 37...Re4?!, Black had seen this far, but no farther. He threatens 40...Rh4 mate. Black might have been hoping that White overlooked the threat. His hopes are disappointed, but while White sees the mate he misses the right defense.

40.Qg3?

After 40.Kh3! Black's attack would be over.

40...Bd6!



Black found this problem-like move with three seconds left. Both Black's d6-bishop and g5-rook are hanging (the latter with check), but White must not take the former (41.Q×d6? Rh4 mate) and cannot take the latter (his queen is pinned by Black's d6-bishop). Even so, Black's position is hanging by a thread because he has so little time.

41.Rh1?

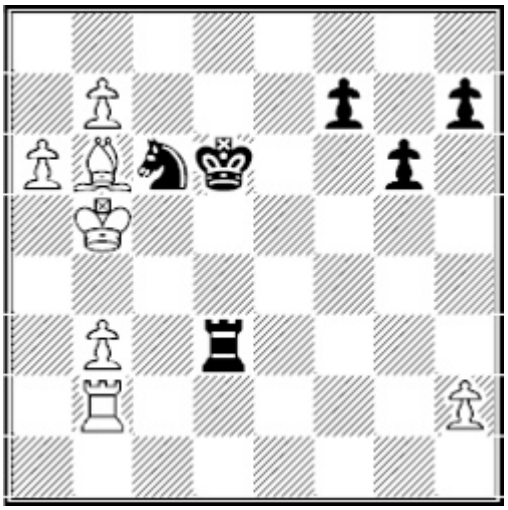
With a little less than ten seconds remaining, White cracks. 41.Rg1 was the only move, and while White loses everything after 41...Rh4+ 42.Kg2 R×g3+ 43.Kf1 R×g1+ 44.K×g1 B×a3 (somehow it's appropriate that White's a3-knight just happens to be hanging as well), Black would have had to find these moves, then promote his e3-pawn and mate, all in three seconds.

Now it doesn’t come to that.

41...R×g3 42.Rg1 Rh4 mate 0-1

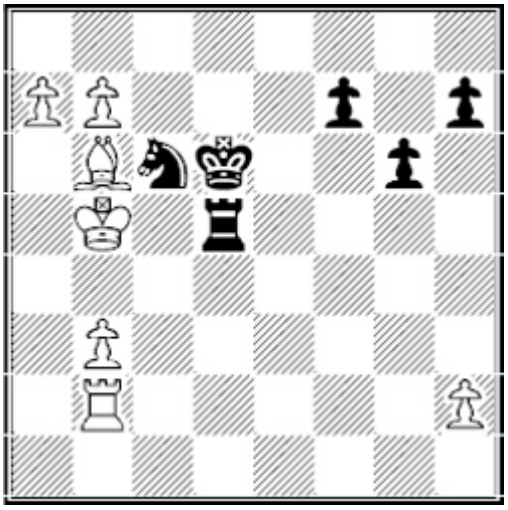
Endgame mates don’t always form part of a considered, well thought out strategy by the victor. An unwary, overconfident or time pressured player can stumble into a self-mate, or checkmates can suddenly happen almost accidentally.

White (2549) – Black (2968) [E81]



White has outplayed his opponent and now should reap the reward for his strong play.

46.a7 Rd5+

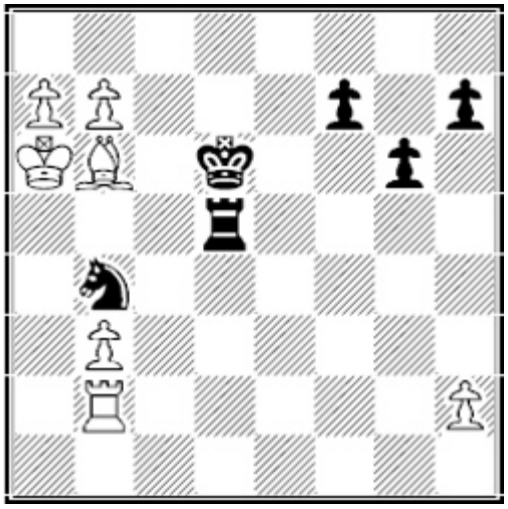


47.Ka6?

A tremendous blunder, likely due to an anticipated shortage of time or just an hallucination.

White has eight seconds left while Black has 16 seconds, but Black's big time edge wouldn't have helped him after either 47.Ka4 or 47.Kc4 because of the open nature of the position.

47...Nb4 mate 0-1

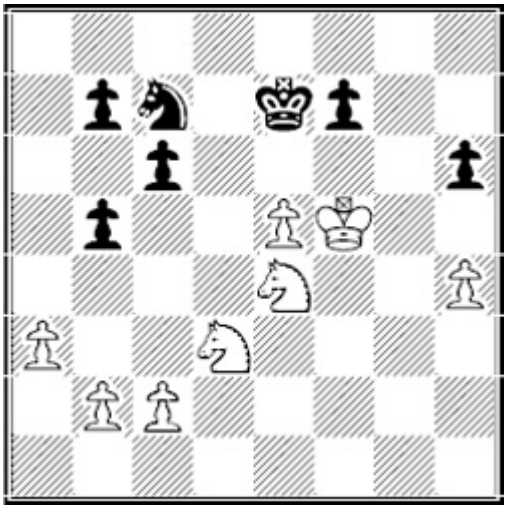


In bullet, it’s possible to get checkmated in almost any position, including seemingly simple – and winning – endings.

If there was any doubt about this, the final example in this chapter should put them to rest. Whatever might happen in the following position, mate certainly isn’t a possibility which comes readily to mind.

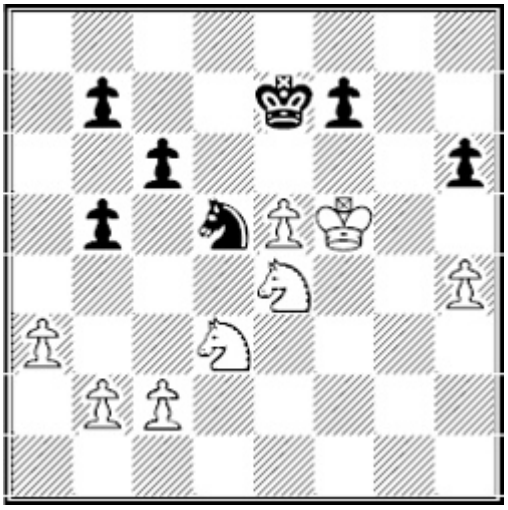
White (1961) – Black (1854) [B07] ***(D)***

White has certainly played well enough to win. He is a whole piece ahead, with a dominant position, and Black’s pawns are vulnerable to attack. White has 19 seconds left, to Black’s 22 seconds.



What can go wrong?

36...Nd5!?



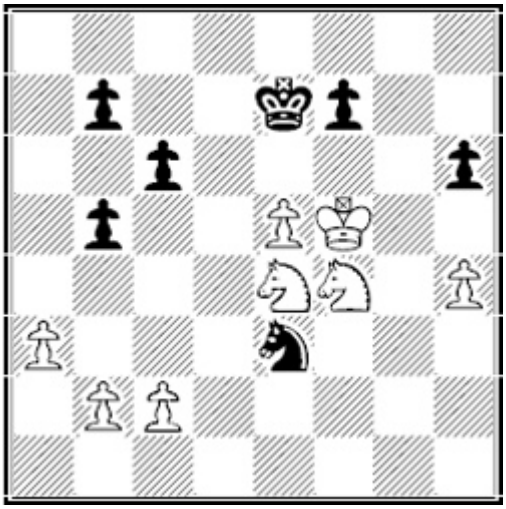
It’s hard to tell if this is a subtle trap in an otherwise hopeless position, or just a move. But Black has to do something.

37.Nf4?

It’s not quite true to say that “White finds the only way to lose,” but there aren’t all that many ways to lose in this position! White tries to chase Black’s knight away from its strong central post, and succeeds only too well.

A desperate warning kibitz came too late to stop White’s suicidal impulse.

37...Ne3! mate 0-1



A reminder, if any was needed, that Murphy’s Law applies to bullet – if it can go wrong, it will go wrong. So be careful!

Solution to Quiz Position 1

White wins with 1.0-0-0+, as Black loses his rook and White has plenty of time to mate. We’re just trying to keep you on your toes...

Chapter 14

Common Mistakes

Chess is a game of mistakes and in no version of chess is this truer than in bullet. With each player having only a minute for the game, the question is not whether mistakes will be made, but rather how many will be made, how bad they will be and whether they will be exploited by the opponent.

One might argue that the whole idea of bullet is to cause players to make mistakes so the games are more interesting than in slower chess. If the frequency and severity of mistakes is the test of interest, bullet wins hands down over normal chess! After all, when we talk about “mistakes” in bullet, we aren’t referring to moving the wrong rook to a file or wasting a tempo – we’re talking about hanging pieces, allowing checkmate and similar dramatics. Mistakes in bullet are almost always on a big scale.

This does not mean that someone who plays quickly and avoids obvious mistakes will be strong at bullet chess, although this would be a very good start! It is quite possible to simply outplay someone in bullet, and in that sense the better player may still win. But often opening theory, strategic plans and positional play only serve to set the stage for mistakes, oversights, blunders and other self-destructive behavior. Sometimes these are triggered by traps or tactical tricks, but often they are spontaneous and simply happen, as players wrestle with the clock and their own inner chess demons.

It isn’t very helpful for us to suggest that you avoid mistakes – even by the generous standards of chess literature, this would be platitudinous. It is

much more useful to try to gain some insight into what causes mistakes in bullet so that you can avoid making them yourself and, equally importantly, see, exploit and even induce mistakes by your opponent.

Mistakes in bullet, as in normal chess, are a psychological phenomenon. They are a reflection of the imperfections of the human mind and as such should be celebrated rather than condemned. That is why chess, in any form, should be played by error-prone humans rather than perfect machines.

That said, we all prefer the mistakes to be made by our opponents, and to that end we examine some of the most common mistakes in bullet. The mistakes we will look at often occur spontaneously, so this chapter might be said to be about how to avoid mistakes in bullet. In the next chapter, we will shift our attention to the equally interesting topic of how to induce mistakes by your opponent.

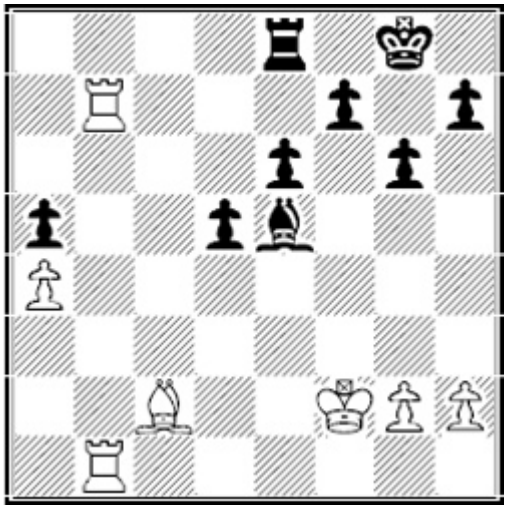
Surprisingly, definite patterns emerge with respect to mistakes and blunders, and the lessons from bullet are directly applicable to normal chess, especially when time trouble is involved. The reader will have encountered some of the more common types of mistakes in previous chapters.

Backwards diagonal moves

Years ago, Danish grandmaster Bent Larsen observed that backwards diagonal moves are often overlooked. We agree, and there are many examples from bullet which confirm his insight.

The first example illustrates the theme in a very simple setting.

White (1857) – Black (1830) [B06]



Black has been thoroughly outplayed and has been lucky to get three pawns for his lost rook. White also has only 12 seconds left, while Black has 26 seconds. White's technical tasks are somewhat challenging, but these issues immediately become moot after White overlooks a backwards diagonal move.

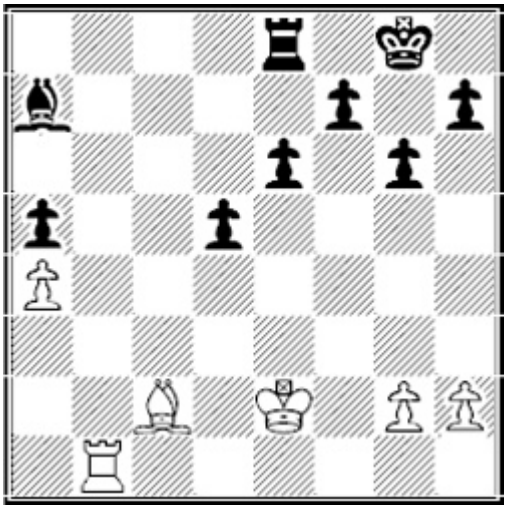
30.Ra7?

Had White observed the basic precaution of putting his pieces on light squares to avoid Black's dark-squared bishop (30.Rd7!), he would have saved himself some grief.

30...Bd4+

Black, aware of the backwards diagonal principle, made this move instantly.

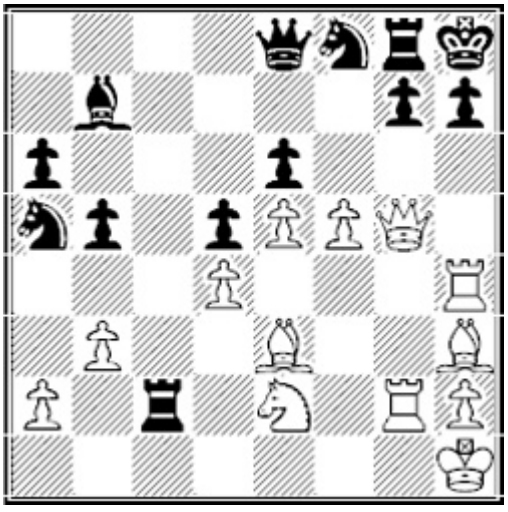
31.Ke2 B×a7 ... 0-1



If there were technical difficulties before, they were nothing compared to White's problems now! White resigned a few moves later, facing a lost position on the board and a 15-second deficit.

Here's another example of missing a backwards diagonal move which, in the cold light of day, seems "obvious."

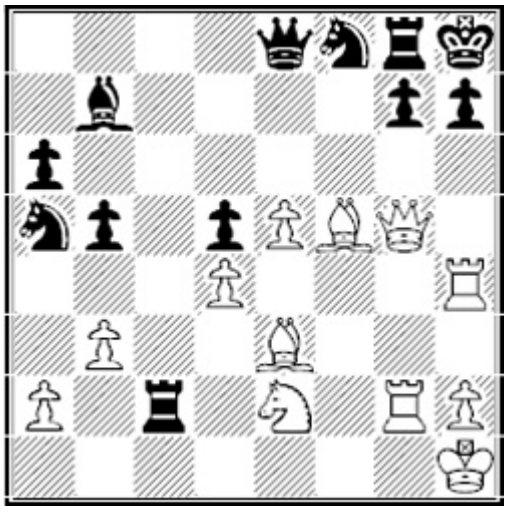
White (2024) – Black (1961) [A00]



White has a decisive advantage on the board, as all his pieces are concentrated against Black's king while Black's a5-knight and b7-bishop

are sadly out of play. Such positional considerations are not always decisive in bullet of course, but with each player having about 30 seconds remaining one might have expected the game to flow smoothly.

28...e×f5?! 29.B×f5

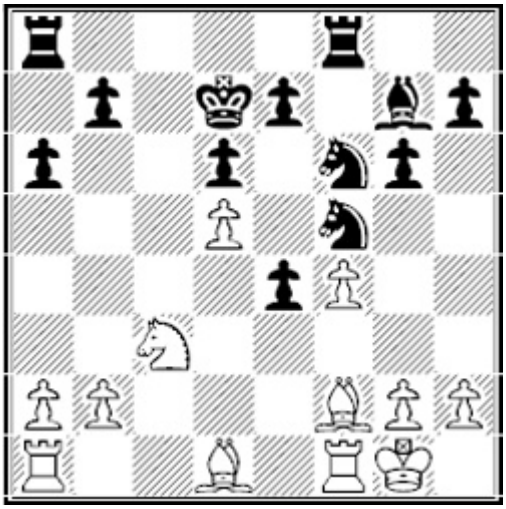


White has threats against h7, and he wins after 29...Rc6 30.B×h7! N×h7 31.R×h7+ K×h7, but only if he finds the difficult 32.Qf5+! (32...g6 33.Qh3+ Kg7 34.Bh6+; 32...Rg6 33.R×g6 Q×g6 34.Qh3+). But things don’t get that far.

29...g6? 30.B×c2 ... 1-0

Black’s backwards diagonal oversight made things easy for his opponent. After missing innumerable brilliant mates, White finally won on move 53, with three seconds left.

White (1824) – Black (1918) [A40]



Black has a comfortable advantage, with an extra pawn, a slight lead in time (31 seconds to 28 seconds remaining) and a more harmonious position. If White had continued with 18.Re1 or 18.Bc2, this game probably wouldn't be in this book. But before we get to the point of this example, let's have a look at a nice double-blunder.

18.Bg4?

After three seconds thought.

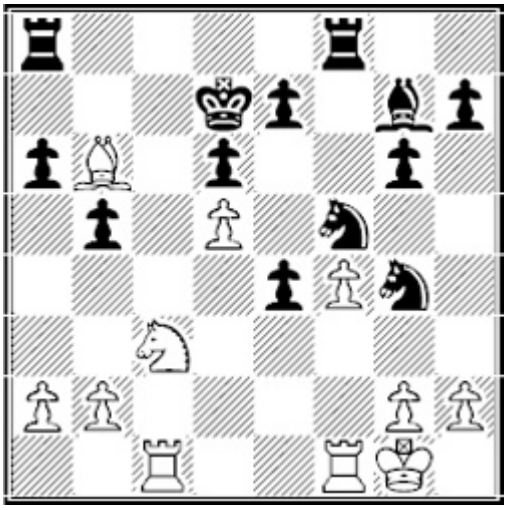
18...b5?

Black completely overlooks that White's g4-bishop is hanging.

19.Rac1? N×g4!

This gets an exclamation mark because Black was the first to see it.

20.Bb6



20...Bd4+!?

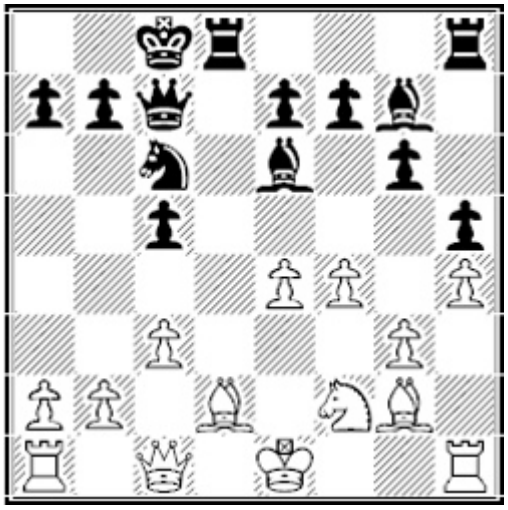
Objectively this is not the best continuation but Black played this move deliberately, having in mind the principle that backwards diagonal moves are the hardest moves to see. Of course, 20...Bd4+ doesn't spoil anything, as after 21.B×d4 N×d4, Black is still winning.

21.Kh1? B×b6 ... 0-1

Mission accomplished! Black's awareness of the principle has netted him an additional piece, making his technical task that much easier. As things turned out this was probably a good thing because White held on for another 22 moves and was checkmated with both players having only six seconds left.

Sometimes a decisive backwards diagonal move can come as quite a surprise.

White (2171) – Black (2015) [A00]



Black has every reason to be pleased. Time is about equal, with each player having a little less than 50 seconds left, and his position is easier to play. A move like 16...Rd7, increasing the pressure on the d-file, would be logical but instead Black decides to force matters.

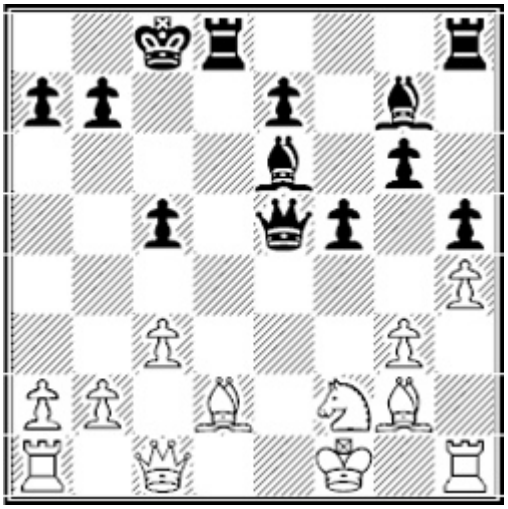
16...f5?! 17.e5

The instinctive reply, shutting Black's g7-bishop out of the game, although 17...f×e4 wasn't much of a threat.

17...N×e5?!

Since Black played this move instantly, it was clearly in his mind when he played 16...f5?! 17...N×e5 was by no means forced, but Black is psyching himself up to lose because he just can't believe White's position will hold together.

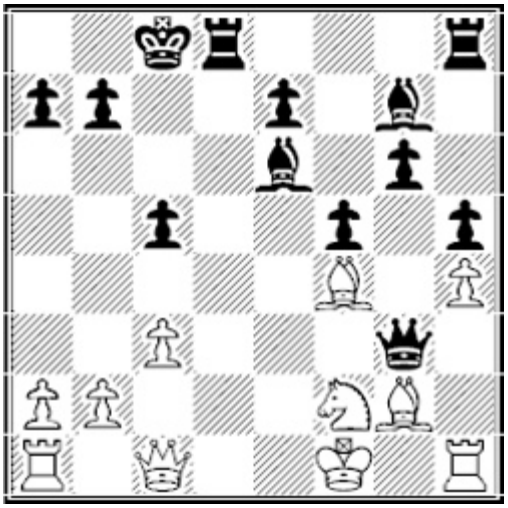
18.f×e5 Q×e5+ 19.Kf1



19...Q×g3?

Played instantly, but Black's combination would have worked better had he seen just one more move...

20.Bf4!



An unusual but not completely unknown queen trap (one example is Bilek-Suttles, Venice, 1974, where Bilek had a bit more time and avoided a similar trap.) **20...Bc4+ 21.Kg1 Bh6**

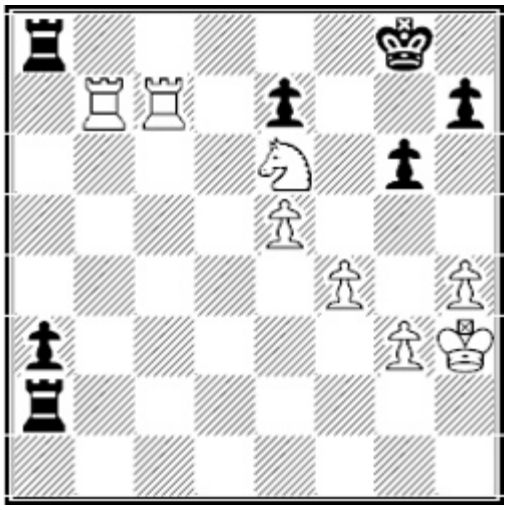
Only now does Black have a long think and after eight seconds he finds a way to escape by only losing another piece, but his dark squares become so weak that only suffering awaits him.

22.B×g3 B×c1 23.R×c1 ... 1-0

With two pieces for three pawns and a seven-second lead in time, White had a pleasant time converting his advantage and eventually won.

In the next example, White gets in trouble by missing a backwards rook move, then is finished off with a backwards diagonal move. Such a pattern of oversights can't be mere coincidence. We think it reveals something important about the way people see the board.

White (1968) – Black (2114) [B06]



In this completely lost position, Black is even behind on time (19 seconds remaining to White's 28 seconds). Black has no defense against White's attack and has only one faint hope – his a3-pawn.

31...Rb2

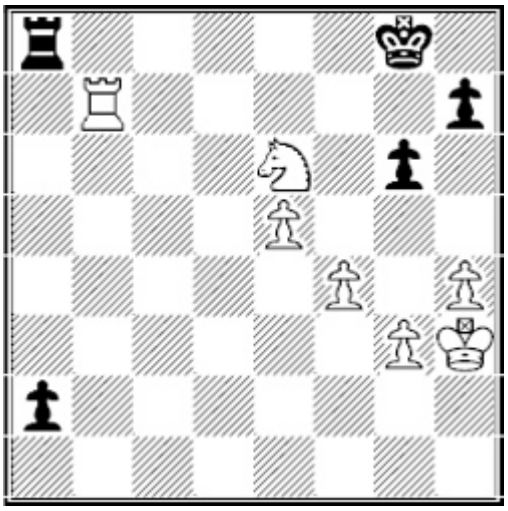
No worse than any other attempt. Black hopes to exchange rooks, both to get his a3-pawn moving and, even more importantly, to prevent 32.R×e7, followed by 33.Rg7+ Kh8 34.R×h7+ Kg8 35.Rbg7 mate.

32.R×e7?

White finds the losing move. After 32.R×b2 a×b2 33.Rb7, or even 32.Ra7, White wins easily.

The main cause of White's mistake was that he was too absorbed in his pretty mate threat, but it's significant that his oversight also involved a backwards move along a file.

32...R×b7 33.R×b7 a2

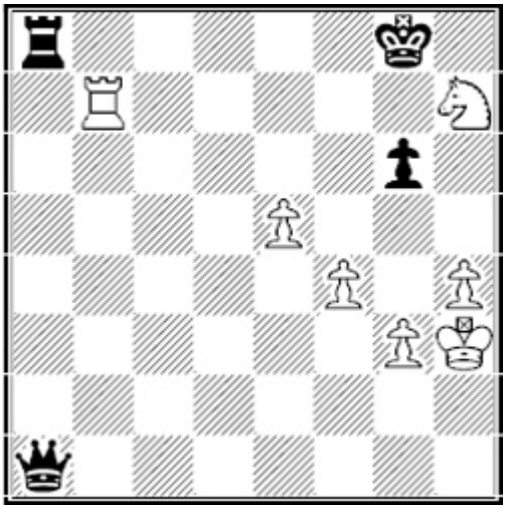


34.Ng5

White is lost, but he tries to bring his knight to f6 and force perpetual check rather than retreating and trying to prolong the game by defending. This is a pretty optimistic plan, not only because his b7-rook has to be on d7 for it to

work and because Black's rook can be used to defend against this "threat" but also because there is a threat looming against White's rook.

34...a1Q 35.N×h7



35...Qh1+

And here it is. This time a White rook disappears from b7 along a backward diagonal, rather than a backward file.

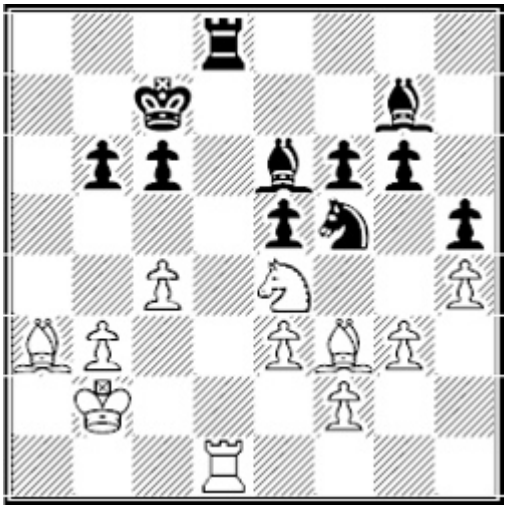
36.Kg4 Q×b7 ... 0-1

Four moves later White let his time run out.

Backward knight moves

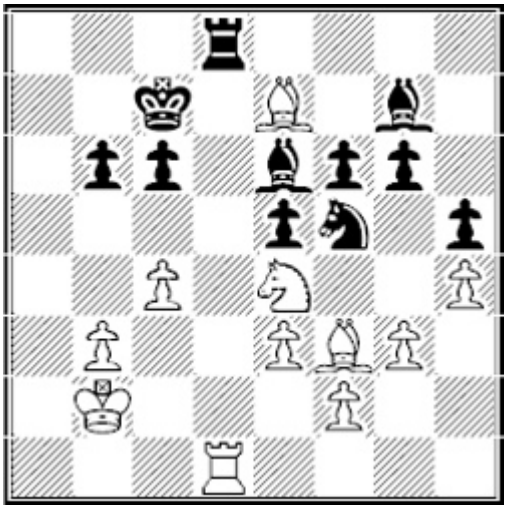
Knights are tricky in the best of times, but it seems that a particular blindness exists for backwards knight moves as well. Curiously, both our examples involve blunders on e7.

White (2529) – Black (2464) [A40]



A somewhat dry game has left Black with a significant advantage in time. With 41 seconds remaining against White's 34 seconds, Black can face the future with confidence. On the board the position is equal, but White now hallucinates, thinking he has a golden opportunity to strike at the heart of Black's kingside pawn structure.

28.Be7?



White took a full two seconds for this move, which demonstrates that, even after some thought, in his mind the optics of his bishop fork (White's e7-

bishop attacks both Black's d8-rook and his f6-pawn) overrode the backwards move by Black's f5-knight which prevents this pretty fork.

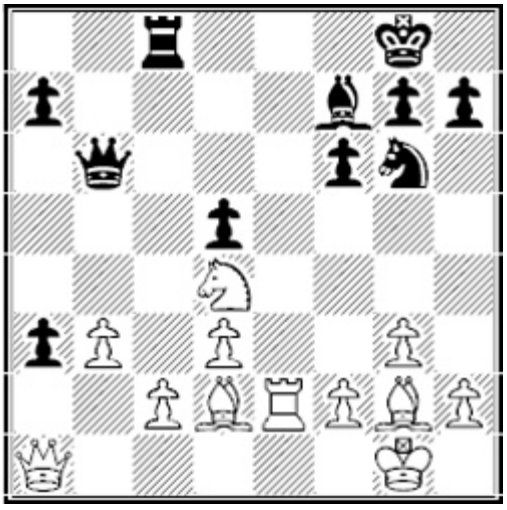
This is also another example of a recurring theme – often bullet blunders are the result of several seconds thought, rather than instinctive, instant moves.

28...N×e7 ... 0-1

Black, not as mesmerized as his opponent, captured White's e7-bishop without hesitation. Backwards moves – whether along diagonals, files or even by knights – are difficult, but not impossible, to see!

Here is another example which illustrates the same theme, with some preliminary blunders to set the stage.

White (2156) – Black (2377) [A00]



White is a piece up and has many ways to win. With 30 seconds left against Black's 35 seconds, it is difficult to attribute the following series of blunders to time.

26.Ne6?

The first mistake: White overlooks a sideways move by Black's queen. We shall see more of these mistakes in a moment.

26...B×e6 27.Q×a3

The intended 27.R×e6 fails to 27...Q×e6.

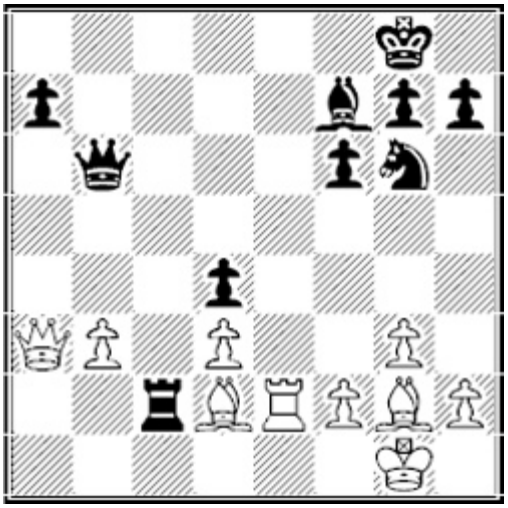
27...Bf7 28.Be3?!

A waste of time.

28...d4 29.Bd2?

White is falling apart. After 29.Bc1, he would retain his extra pawn, but mistakes sometimes come in bunches.

29...R×c2



Now White is slightly worse, so he continues consistently.

30.Qe7?

Overlooking a backwards knight move.

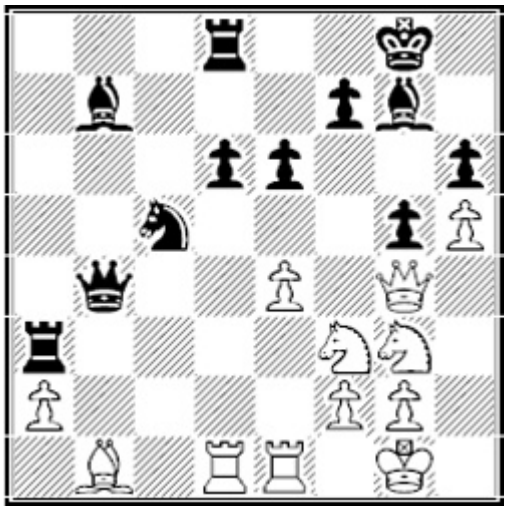
30...N×e7 0-1

After this debacle, all White could do is start another game.

Sideways moves

Sideways moves by queens and rooks are also commonly overlooked for some reason.

White (1728) – Black (1863) [B06]



Both players have 20 seconds left and White has problems. He is a pawn down and Black's pieces are hyperactive. This makes it difficult for White to create threats, since he has to focus on avoiding them.

The most striking feature of the position, though, is the sinister pin on White's e4-pawn along his fourth rank. Black notices this and strikes.

27...d5!?

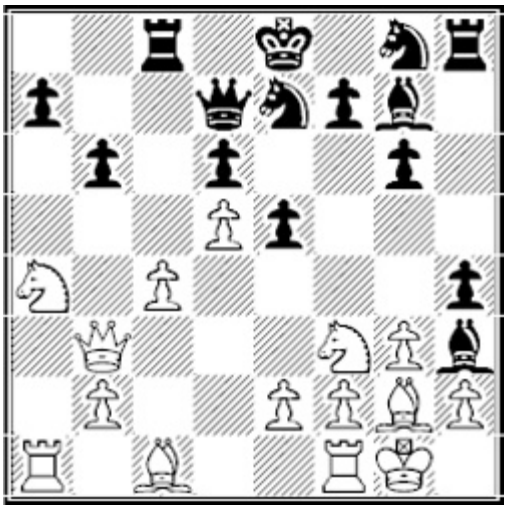
Black spent a hefty six seconds deciding between 27...d5!? and the objectively stronger 27...f5! But the distinction immediately disappears, because now White makes the surprisingly common oversight of missing a long sideways move.

28.e×d5? Q×g4 ... 0-1

And that's that. With 13 seconds left, Black had no real difficulty converting his enormous material advantage.

Sometimes the play reveals just how embedded this perceptual shortcoming is in our brains.

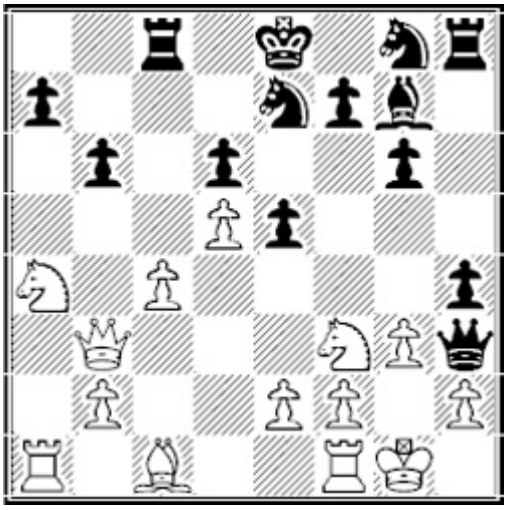
White (2173) – Black (2066) [A04]



Black has accepted queenside weaknesses in exchange for attacking possibilities on the kingside. This is not a bad trade in bullet because Black might lose a pawn or two if things go wrong on the queenside, but if White

fails to defend his king properly, he may well get mated. With time about equal (both players have around 40 seconds left), White exchanges bishops.

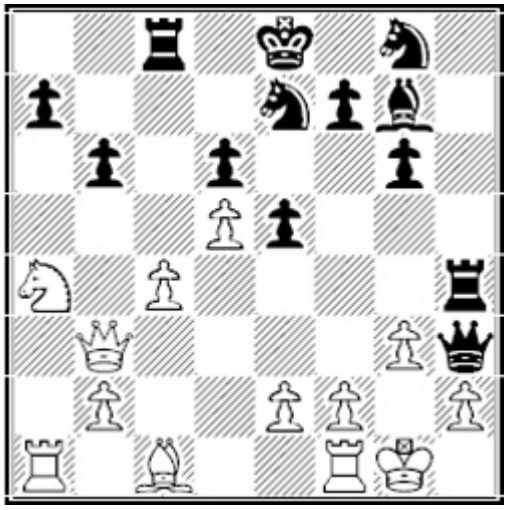
15.B×h3!? Q×h3



16.N×h4?!

A mistake, which turns out to be the prelude to a worse one. After 16.Nc3!, taking control of e4, it is not easy for Black to find a convincing way to continue his attack.

16...R×h4!?



An understandable reaction, although 16...Bf6! was stronger (17.Nf3 e4!).

17.g×h4?

White completely overlooks that his g3-pawn is pinned along the third rank. In part this is because in most positions White's b3-queen would be protected by his a2-pawn, but mainly this is because sideways moves are harder to see. While this example is instructive it is also somewhat tragic because White had 17.Qb5+! Kf8 18.g×h4, with a murky position.

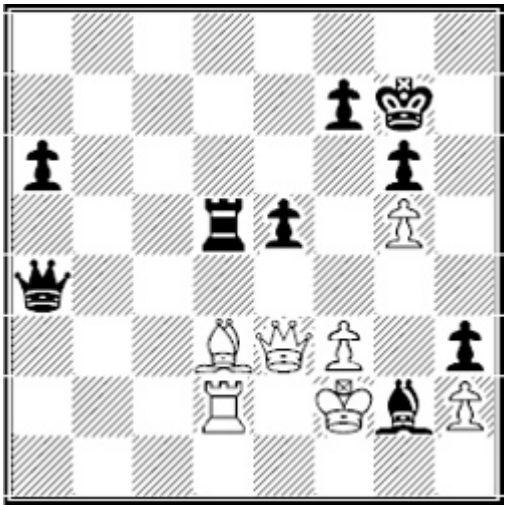
17...Q×b3 ... 0-1

White fought on for another 15 moves, but to no avail.

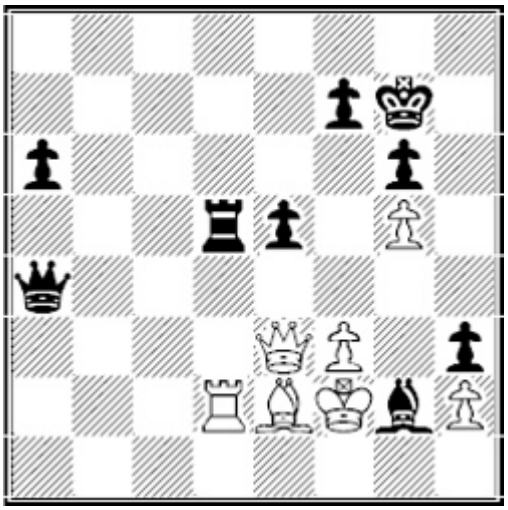
Even very strong players can miss sideways moves, especially long ones.

White (2411) – Black (2423) [B06] ***(D)***

Black has played well. He is two pawns up and has a ten-second lead in time (31 seconds to 21 seconds). In an effort to relieve the pressure, White offers an exchange of rooks, giving Black an unexpected opportunity.



38.Be2?!



38...R×d2?!

Good enough to win, but 38...Qh4+! 39.Kg1 Qe1+ 40.Bf1 Q×f1 was a pretty mate. 38...Qh4+!, the longest sideways move possible, was hard to see, especially when 38...R×d2?! wins prosaically.

It’s encouraging to realize that the strongest players are also human, and their oversights, while less common, are not that different from those which plague the average player.

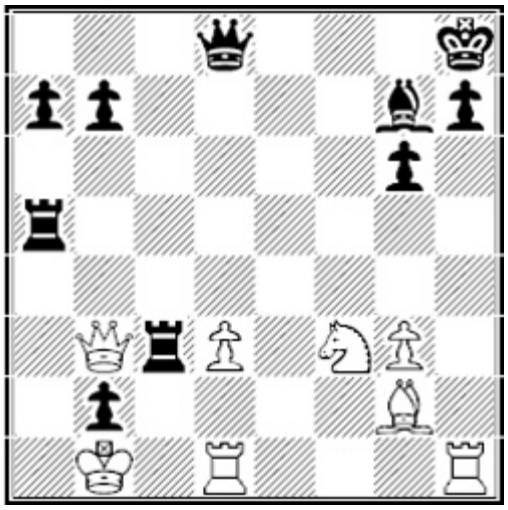
39.Q×d2 a5 ... 0-1

Black won the ending.

In the previous example, Black's oversight didn't cost him anything, other than consigning an attractive mate to the notes, rather than having it in the game itself.

But sideways blindness appears to be so pronounced and ingrained that even "only" moves can be overlooked. In the next example, Black's only defense against mate is a sideways rook move. Despite what one would consider fairly compelling circumstances, he still misses the correct defense and succumbs to a fairly simple attack.

White (2010) – Black (1961) [A00]



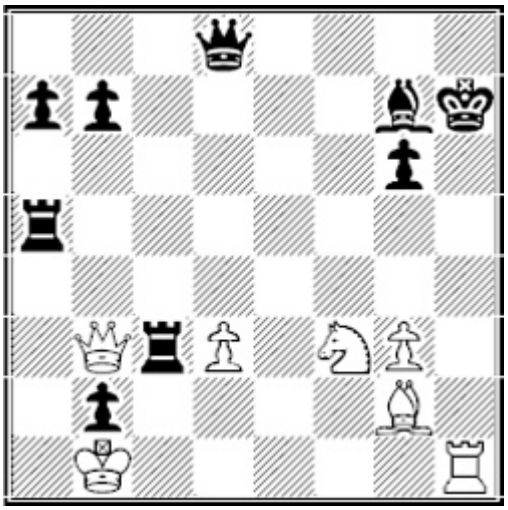
After achieving an easily winning position out of the opening, White has managed to get himself in serious trouble, mainly by simply ignoring Black's counter-attack in favor of an unsound attack of his own. White has 14 seconds remaining and Black has 13 seconds.

With nothing to lose, White carries out his plan, relying on the proven tendency of players to overlook sideways moves.

28.R×h7+!?

This loses, but so does everything else.

28...K×h7 29.Rh1+



29...Bh6?

Played almost instantly. This game is a striking example of the blindness often encountered in relation to sideways moves, especially long ones. 29...Rh5! completely ends White's "attack" and leaves Black with an easily winning position. While this long sideways move (there can't be a longer one) wins for Black, the alternative 29...Bh6? not only leads to a quick mate for White but also leaves Black's c3-rook undefended, allowing White to defend his own king if necessary.

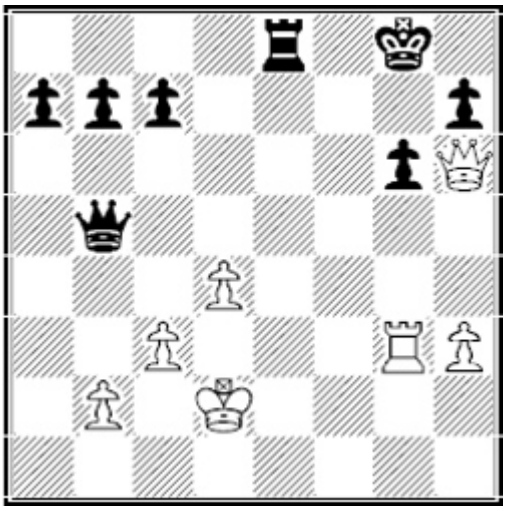
Even more interestingly, Black's a5-rook came from f5 less than ten moves earlier, so 29...Rh5! would really only be a reversal of a move which was

already made in the game. Black has proven in this very game that he knows that rooks can move sideways, and yet he still misses the winning 29...Rh5! and plays a losing move...

30.Qf7+ Kh8 31.R×h6 mate 1-0

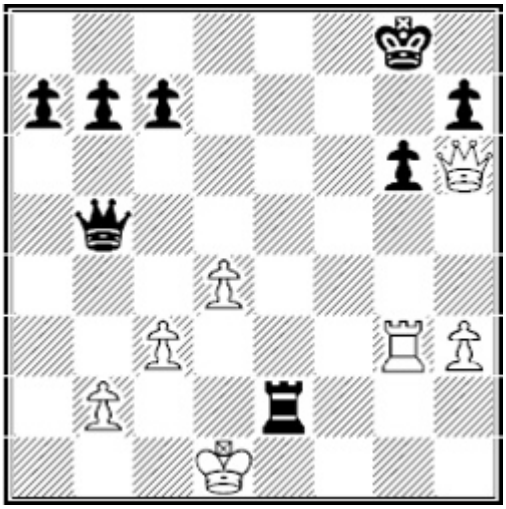
While the most commonly missed sideways moves tend to be along an entire rank, any sideways move can be missed.

White (2256) – Black (2167) [B06]



Despite his time deficit (19 seconds to 31 seconds), Black can finish off White easily with 28...Q×b2+ 29.Kd1 Qe2+ 30.Kc1 Qe1+ and 31...Q×g3, leaving White with no counterplay (30....Qd1+, with a mating attack, is also good).

28...Re2+?! 29.Kd1



29...Qd3+?

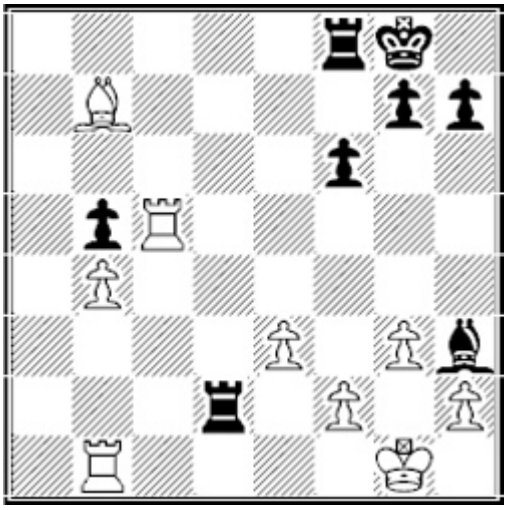
By now the reader will see instantly why this fails. After 29...R×b2, Black is still winning because White's rook sacrifice on g6 peters out.

30.R×d3 1-0

There doesn't seem to be any specific basis for missing sideways moves – they are just hard to see! It stands to reason, though, that players are in even more danger of missing a sideways move when they are caught up in their own plan and play what seems to be a strong, aggressive move of their own.

The tendency in bullet to focus on your own ideas, without regard for the opponent's threats or defensive resources, is dangerous enough on its own. It is quite often fatal when combined with "hard-wired" oversights involving backwards or sideways moves.

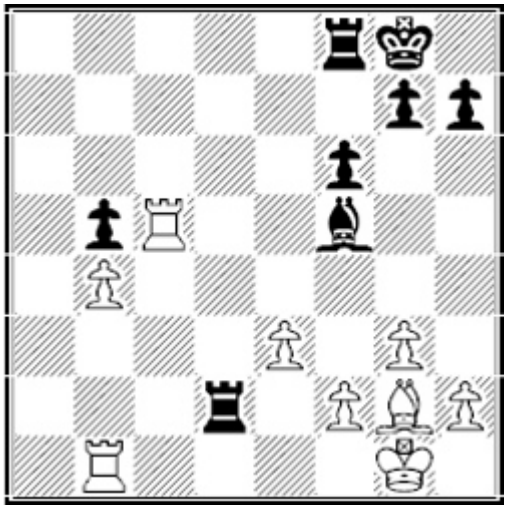
White (2205) – Black (2219) [A00]



Black's only hope is that he has 32 seconds left, while White has only 25 seconds. White reckons that this is enough time to win a double-rook ending, so he decides to enhance his king's safety by offering an exchange of pieces in order to evict Black's bishop from its annoying outpost on h3.

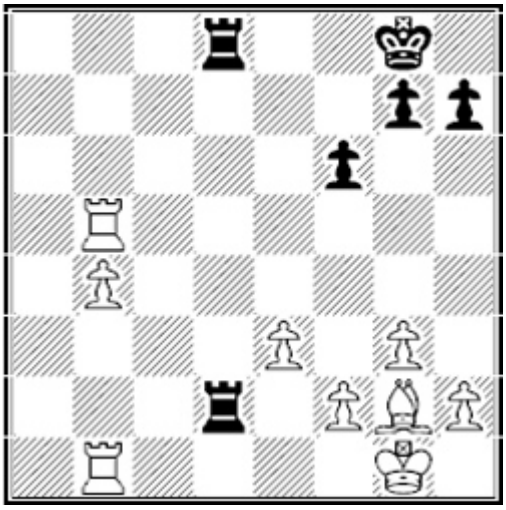
25.Bg2 Bf5? ***(D)***

Black "gains a tempo" by attacking White's b1-rook, but in so doing he makes a typical mistake, missing the sideways action of White's c5-rook.



Black was losing anyway, of course, but the error is instructive, in part because it occurs in such a simplified position.

26.R×f5 Rfd8 27.R×b5



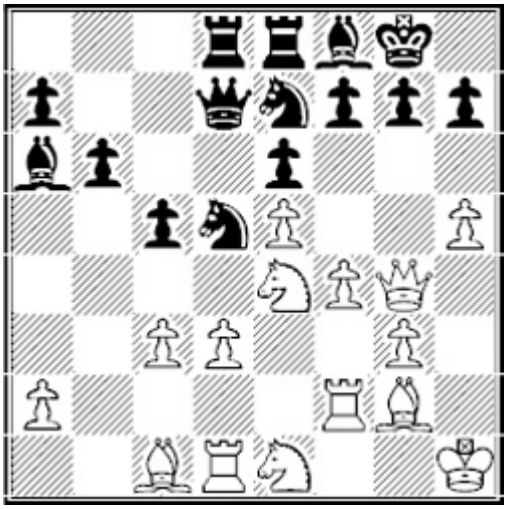
27...h5

By this point, most readers won't need convincing that sideways moves are a fertile field for blunders, but as though to prove the point again Black now gives away more material along the same ill-fated rank.

28.R×h5 ... 1-0

With 19 seconds remaining to Black's 28 seconds and a fast b-pawn (not to mention an extra piece and a few extra pawns), White converted his advantage after Black resisted for another 26 (!) moves.

White (2100) – Black (2108) [A00]



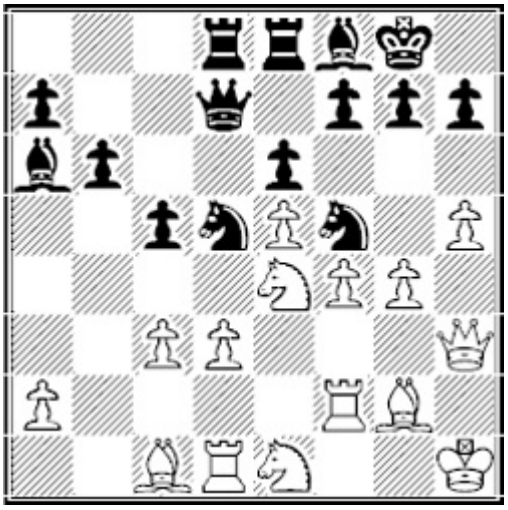
23.Qh3?

Perhaps flustered by his time deficit (26 seconds to Black's 40 seconds), White overlooks 23.c4!, winning a piece. But that's incidental to this example.

23...Nf5

23...Qa4!, with a hard struggle ahead (as they say) was better, but that's quibbling.

24.g4



Evicting Black's f5-knight, although this should not be decisive.

24...Nfe3?

Black completely misses that White's h3-queen covers the e3-square from the side.

25.B×e3 N×e3 26.Q×e3 ... 1-0

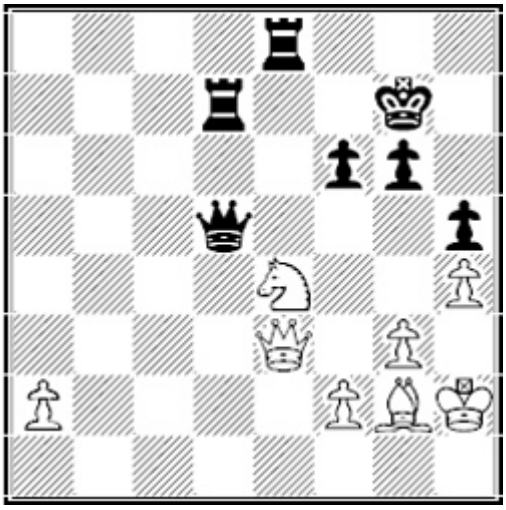
Now Black's time advantage isn't quite as important. White went on to win, mating Black on move 59 with less than a second left.

Knight forks

Another type of threat which is commonly overlooked is one to which every beginner can relate – knight forks. As one of the two most fundamental tactics, the other being the pin, forks are common and knights excel at them, because they can attack any other piece without themselves being under attack from their victim.

In bullet, knight forks can be particularly horrific, as the following example illustrates.

White (2162) – Black (2061) [A00]



White has played with imagination, perhaps too much so. After sacrificing two exchanges, he has some, but not much, compensation for his material deficit. After all, rooks are stronger than minor pieces! Stronger, but not as tricky...

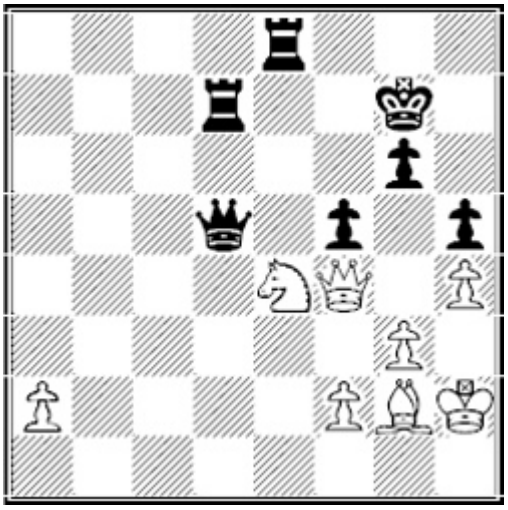
With his next move, White unpins his e4-knight and creates a threat.

29.Qf4

White now has 25 seconds left, while Black has 27 seconds.

29...f5?

There were many ways to defend against the attack on f6, the best being 29...Qd4. 29...f5? allows White to complicate the play with a unexpected reply.

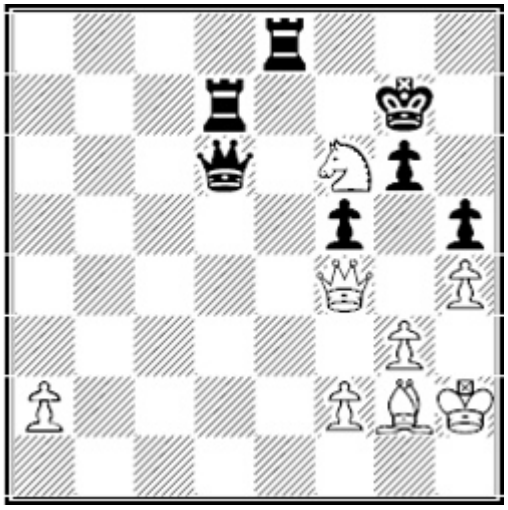


30.Nf6!

This reply catches Black by surprise, as it not only forks Black's rooks, but also discovers an attack on Black's d4-queen from White's g2-bishop.

30...Qd6? ***(D)***

After several seconds thought. The safest response was for Black to give up his queen with either 30...Q×g2+ or 30...K×f6, leaving him with two rooks for a queen and a pawn, with about a two-second deficit. 30...Qe6 doesn't solve Black's problems, incidentally, as after 31.N×e8+ Q×e8 32.Bc6 regains the second exchange, leaving Black with a difficult defensive task in a queen and pawn ending.



The move Black actually played leads to a horror show.

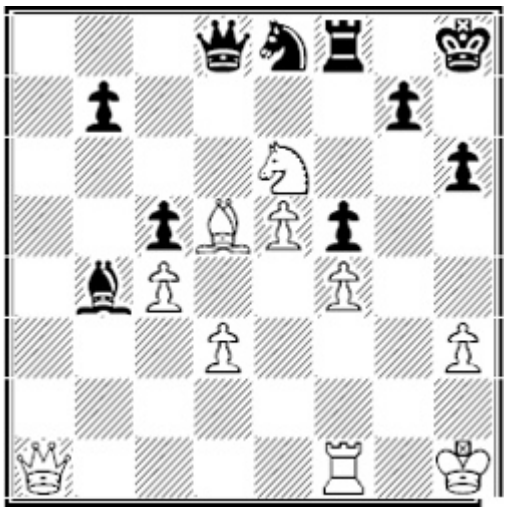
31.N×e8+ 1-0

Preoccupied with the discovered attack on his queen, Black completely overlooked this deadly knight fork, which wins uncountable amounts of material. Black resigned.

It's not only the defender who can miss a knight fork. In the heat of battle, the opportunity for a knight fork can also be overlooked, sometimes with humorous results.

White (2006) – Black (2062) [A00] ***(D)***

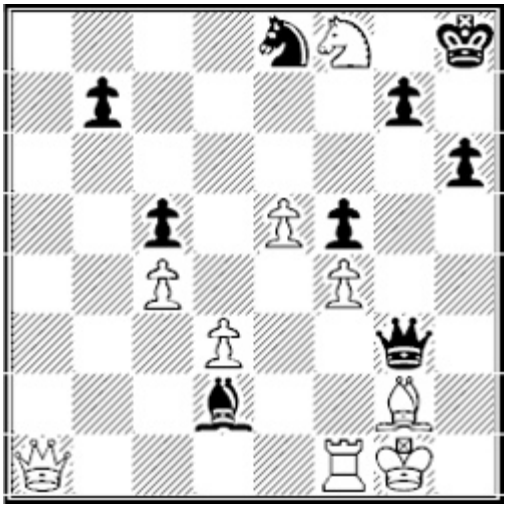
Black has fallen into a knight fork and is losing. Since he is also behind on time, with only 22 seconds remaining to White's 34 seconds, he opts for a desperate counterattack.



25...Qh4?! 26.N×f8 Q×h3+ 27.Kg1 Qg3+ 28.Bg2

This backwards diagonal move, which Black likely overlooked, should securely defend White's king, but there's a bit more excitement to come.

28...Bd2

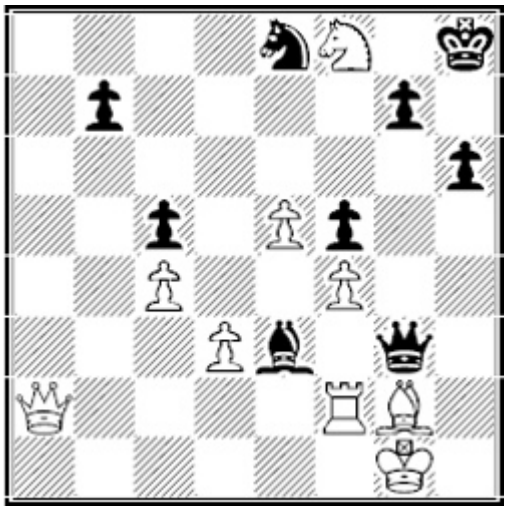


Why not? Black has nothing to lose. At least he has managed to create a threat.

29.Qa2?

Missing 29.Rf3!, freeing f1 for White’s king.

29...Be3+ 30.Rf2



30...Q×f4?

A blunder with 12 seconds left.

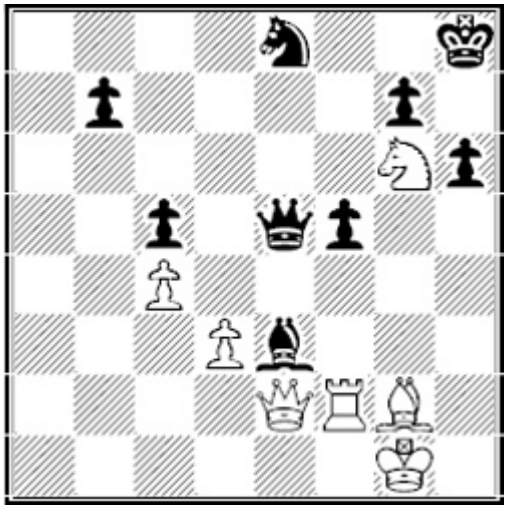
31.Qe2?

White overlooks a second knight fork. 31.Ng6+ picks up Black’s queen.

31...Q×e5?

White’s not the only one who is having trouble seeing backwards knight moves.

32.Ng6+



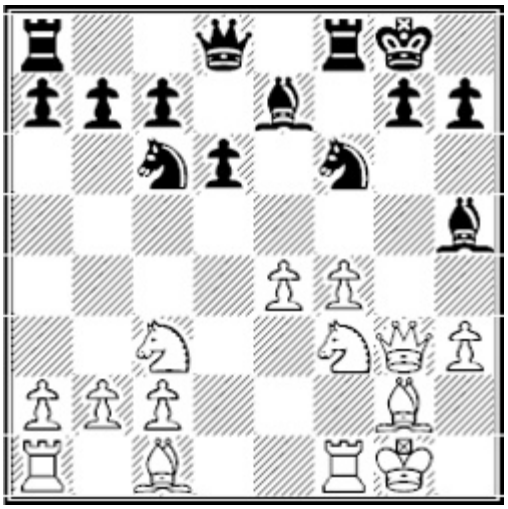
Finally!

32...Kh7 33.N×e5 2-0

At this point, Black disconnected and forfeited, which is generally considered to be worth two points, rather than just one.

Players can also have trouble seeing just what is being forked.

White (1933) – Black (1806) [A00]



At this point, with lots of time left, Black decides to open the center.

13...d5!? 14.Ng5!?

A tricky move to meet in a bullet game.

14...N×e4?

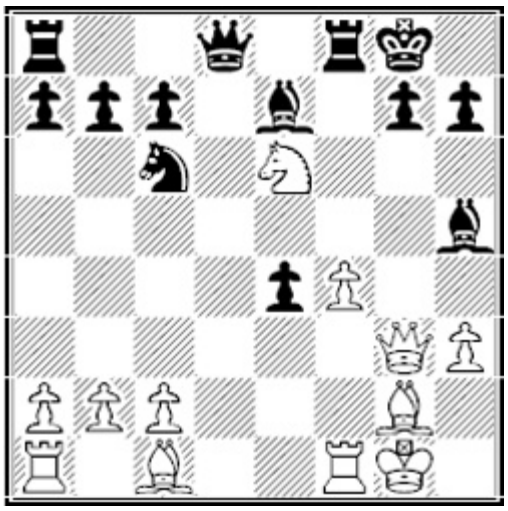
Black took seven seconds for this blunder.

15.Nc×e4 d×e4 16.Ne6

This fork wins something, but it's hard to tell what at first glance. White seems to be winning an exchange, because 16...Qd4+ is impossible, but White's e6-knight forks more than just Black's queen and rook... ***(D)***

16...Bh4?!

With more than 30 seconds left, Black misses the threat, which is hidden in plain sight, although playing on without his queen wasn't an attractive prospect either..



17.Q×g7 mate 1-0

Discovered attacks

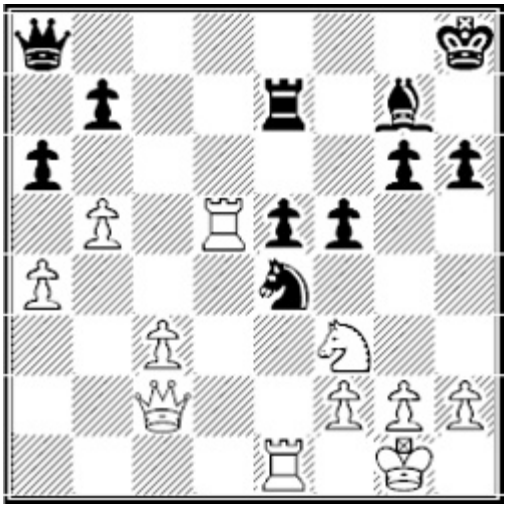
The final category of mistake worth mentioning is the discovered attack. In bullet, it is only natural to react to the opponent's last move by thinking "He moved his rook – is it attacking anything?" We have certainly seen that this is no guarantee that a direct threat will be noticed, but normally players will at least look for such threats.

Discovered attacks are more subtle, because it is not the piece or pawn which just moved which is making the threat, but rather another piece, which might be far from the scene of the crime.

The next example is simple and obvious, except to the victim.

White (1857) – Black (1962) [B06] ***(D)***

White's fine positional play has given him a winning position, although he has only 11 seconds left to convert his advantage (Black has 31 seconds). Well aware of this, Black makes a transparent, but slightly subtle, threat.



25...b6!?

Objectively, this move is no worse than a number of others, but there's an off-chance it might work. White might not see that his d5-rook is hanging, might have to take a bit of extra time to defend against the threat, or might even have pre-moved.

26.Nd2?

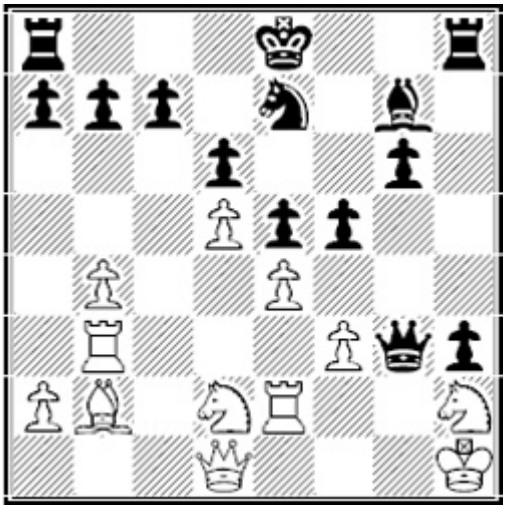
White overlooks the threat, probably because he just glanced at Black's last move and saw that Black's b6-pawn doesn't threaten anything. Nor does it, because the threat is from Black's queen, far away in the corner.

26...Q×d5 ... 0-1

And it's all over in the blink of an eye. With a 20-second time advantage, Black didn't have to do anything more to win, and after another ten moves, White lost on time.

Whenever two of the common blind spots combine the ingredients for disaster are present, as our final example shows. Sometimes one wonders how it's possible to see anything in bullet!

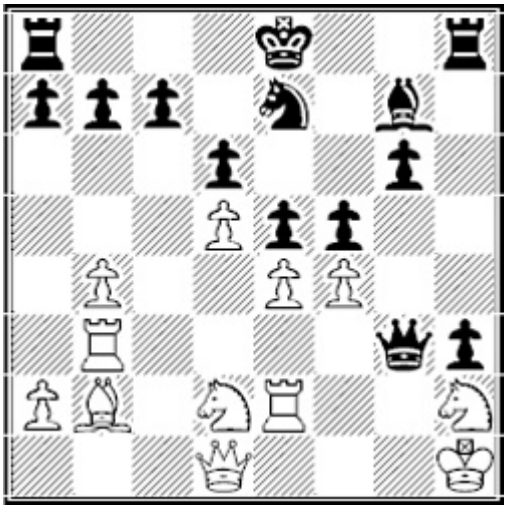
White (2315) – Black (2253) [A00]



Black has conducted an imaginative attack, with six of his last eight moves being with his queen. This has come at a price, though, as Black has only 31 seconds left, while his opponent has 40 seconds. This is cause for some concern, as there is no obvious way for Black to continue his attack. With this in mind, Black decides his first priority is to resolve the question of his king. But it’s White’s move.

23.f4?!

Or “!?” if you prefer. White, perhaps realizing that it is as difficult for him to find a coherent defense as it is for Black to press his attack, lashes out.



23...0-0-0?

Black, while seeing he could play 23...Q×f4, decides not to be materialistic and completes his development. If “not being materialistic” includes hanging a queen for nothing, this is a fair comment. Black’s oversight is understandable, as 23.f4?! involves a discovered sideways attack along a rank – a frightening combination of two of the most common mistakes.

24.R×g3 1-0

Chapter 15

Mental Errors

In the previous chapter we discussed the most common tactical errors in bullet chess. Players who can avoid those errors – and exploit them when they are made by their opponents – will improve their play noticeably. But there are other types of errors which must be examined as well.

As the title of this chapter indicates, we now turn to the subject of "mental errors," by which we mean mistakes which stem from flawed thought processes. These can be distinguished from the mistakes in the previous chapter, which can be thought of as "perceptual errors." It's one thing not to see a backwards move or a knight fork, but it's something else not to even consider the opponent's possibilities. Perception problems can be solved, at least to some extent, by being aware of them. Conceptual problems require more effort to solve, but the process also begins with awareness.

When it comes to mistakes, bullet chess is not that much different from normal chess, except that the consequences of errors are more quickly seen and are often more extreme. In all forms of chess, players may get into trouble because of wishful thinking, self-delusion, obsessive behavior and other counter-productive mental processes. What makes bullet different, though, is that the players have much less time available to control themselves – if a player's first reaction is to greedily grab material, in bullet he or she is much more likely to do so than in normal chess.

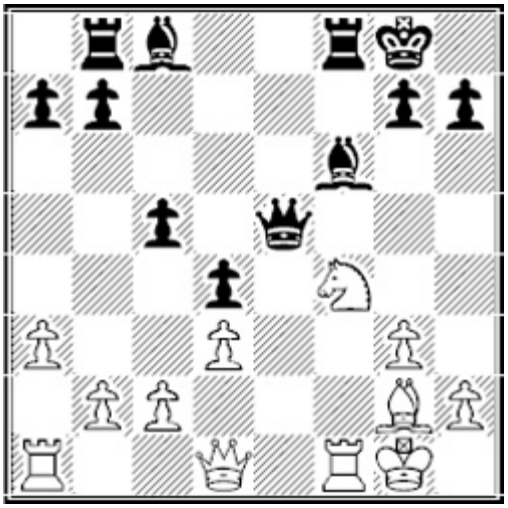
Wishful thinking

While it is desirable to impose your will on your opponent, even in bullet there should usually be some objective basis for your play. Players can get in trouble when they play without sufficient concern for factors such as king safety, material and so on.

This type of thinking is not so much concentrating overly on your own plan, but rather involves pretending or convincing yourself that nothing can go wrong. Chess would be a very simple game were this really so!

In our first example, Black fearlessly keeps the queens on the board, forgetting that we evolved the emotion of fear for good reasons and that there are other things to worry about besides saber-toothed tigers and cave bears.

White (2159) – Black (2174) [A00]



White has a slightly more harmonious position because of his lead in development, but Black has a small time advantage, with 46 seconds left to White’s 41 seconds. The game is therefore about equal, and the position is quiet. Who would think that the game will end in four moves?

18.Qh5!

A good move, which brings White's strongest piece closer to Black's king. 18.Qh5! also forces Black to decide whether to exchange queens or not. Black does not choose wisely.

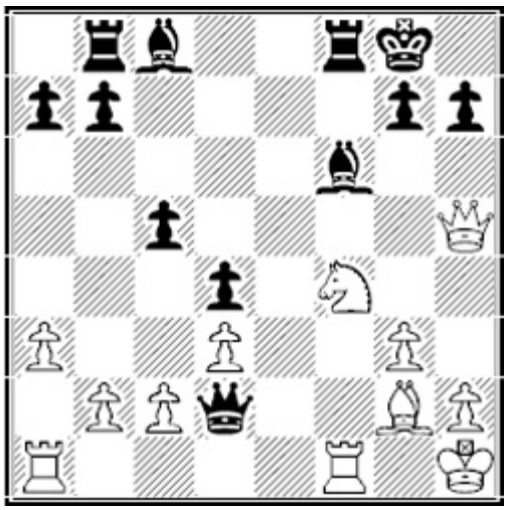
18...Qe3+?

After thinking for ten seconds, Black deliberately refuses to exchange queens, presumably convinced that if anything bad happens it will happen to White.

19.Kh1

19.Rf2 was slightly better, but Black is still in trouble, as now White threatens both 20.Q×c5 and Black's king.

19...Qd2?

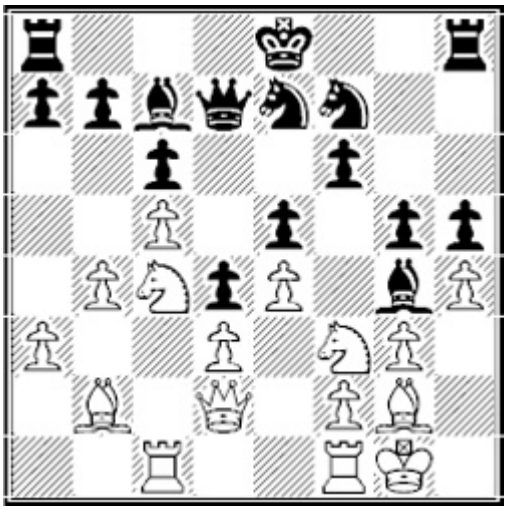


Completely focused on his own "attack" and oblivious to any danger, Black misses White's main threat.

20.Bd5+ Kh8 21.Ng6 mate 1-0

In the next game, Black is intent on attacking White's king and ignores the danger to his own.

White (2046) – Black (2291) [A00]

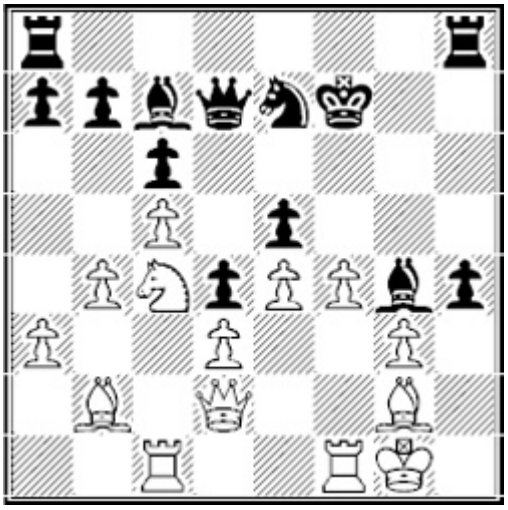


Black has played the opening well and has an easy attack on the kingside.

17.h×g5 f×g5?!

With both players having 42 seconds left, Black has no need to take chances and should play 17...B×f3! 18.B×f3 N×g5. Instead he sacrifices, hoping to just blow White off the board.

18.N×g5 h4?! 19.N×f7 K×f7 20.f4!

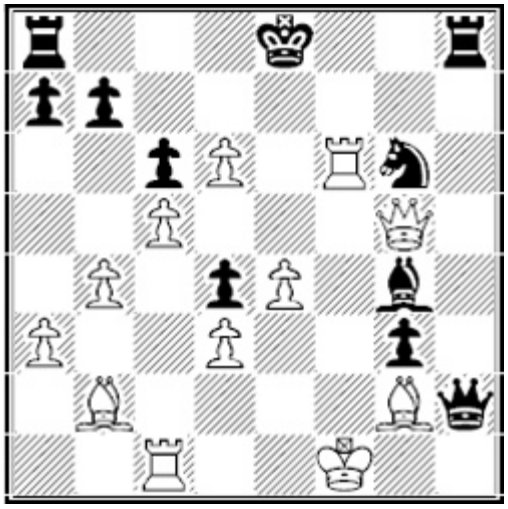


Now both sides are attacking and Black's king is more exposed than White's. This is another illustration of the common mistake of over-optimism, coupled with concentrating too much on your own plan while disregarding your opponent's counterplay.

20...h×g3 21.f×e5+ Ke8 22.Nd6+ B×d6 23.e×d6 Ng6 24.Qg5

24.Qe1, followed by 25.Q×g3, was even stronger.

24...Qh7 25.Rf6 Qh2+ 26.Kf1



This is certainly not the position Black wanted ten moves ago! His natural kingside pressure has become a desperate race against White's unstoppable attack.

26...Nh4 27.Re6+!?

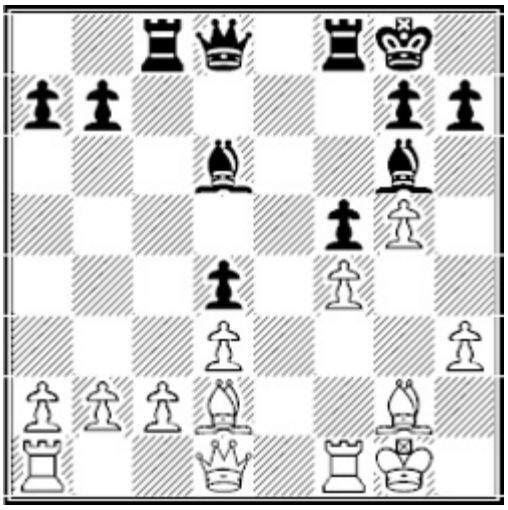
27.Qe5+ mated, but the move played is trickier and wins as well.

27...B×e6?! 28.Qe7 mate 1-0

Each player had 22 seconds left.

In the next example Black's indifference to danger is even more pronounced. It's hard to imagine his plan working and his wishful thinking as to his king's invulnerability results in harsh disillusionment.

White (2015) - Black (2000) [A00]



Black is in some difficulty, as he is a pawn down, although he has some compensation because he is slightly ahead on time (White has 44 seconds remaining and Black has 49 seconds). Rather than seeking normal

counterplay with 17...Qb6, Black conceives of a startlingly original idea which he follows through to its logical conclusion.

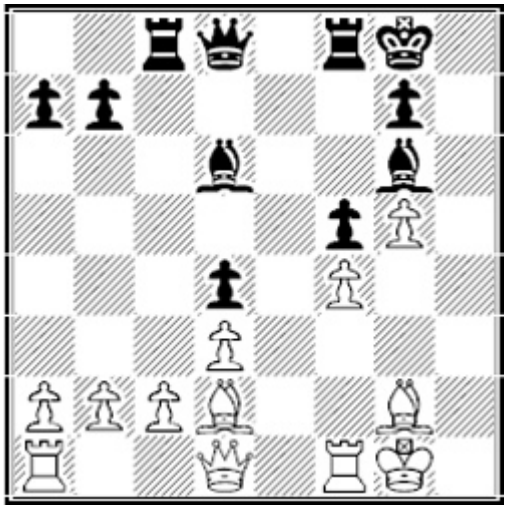
17...h6?! 18.h4

White could play 18.B×b7, but instead he decides quite reasonably to support his g5-pawn, maintaining his grip on the position.

18...h×g5 19.h×g5 ***(D)***

19...Kf7?!

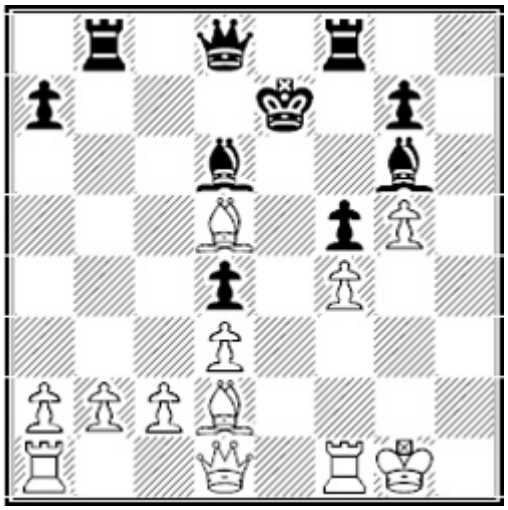
Here is Black's idea, which explains his previous two moves. He is going to attack down the h-file! This audacious plan is altogether admirable, even though objectively it not only has no chance of success (White's king is well-protected) but also exposes Black's king to a vicious assault. Despite these minor flaws, one has to applaud Black's monarch for leading its troops into battle, even though it becomes the first casualty.



20.B×b7 Rb8

The first sign of trouble – Black takes three seconds to reply to 20.B×b7, and misses 20...Rc5, which at least stops 21.Bd5+. At this point, White has 40 seconds left, while Black has 44 seconds.

21.Bd5+ Ke7



22.Bb3?!

Missing 22.Qe2+! Kd7 23.Qe6+ Kc7 24.Ba5+.

22...Rh8

Black hasn't gone to all this trouble for nothing. He continues to execute his plan. After all, what can go wrong?

23.Qf3

Once again, 23.Qe2+, followed by 24.Qe6(+), was faster.

23...Bc7 24.Rae1+ Kf8 25.Qc6

A powerful move which attacks Black's g6-bishop.

25...Bh5

Black continues his “attack,” but the better 25...Qd6 runs into 26.Re6.

26.a3?!

White hesitates, overlooking 26.Qc5+, followed by 27.Q×f5+, which mates in nine moves (as does 26.Bb4+, curiously enough).

26...Rb6?! 27.Bb4+

By this point, Black has a 12-second lead in time but it doesn’t matter.

27...Bd6 28.B×d6+ Q×d6 29.Qc8+! 1-0

Obsessing

The most extreme form of wishful thinking is obsessing, which is the dark side of the “strategic focus” we commended in an earlier chapter. Your own child is always the best looking and smartest in the class, and it is only natural to fall in love with the plan you come up with in a bullet game. After all, it’s your plan!

As we have discussed, up to a point that’s a good thing. Even though you may miss unexpected opportunities, if your plan is a good one you will win if you carry it out. But the truth of the old saying that “a bad plan is better than none at all” is questionable, especially in bullet, as a bad plan can destroy your position while a good plan definitely helps.

Problems arise when players pursue their plans, even good ones, no matter what. Inflexibility is tolerable up to a point, and sometimes such determination will work as your opponent will trust you and go along with

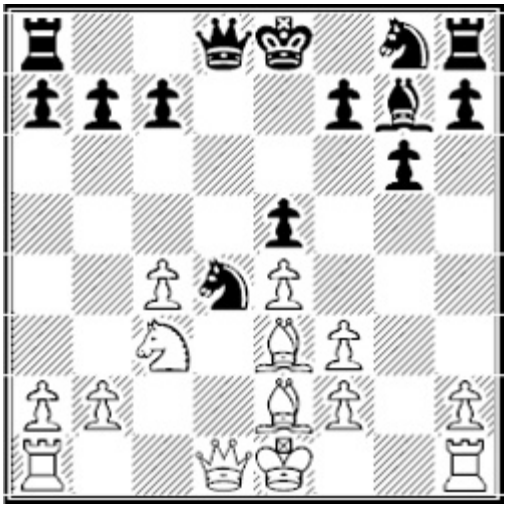
your plan. But in many cases this sort of tunnel vision can also cause you to drive straight off a cliff...

Our first example really is meant only to show just how surreal things can get when the players think only of their own idea and tune out everything else. The players not only are like ships passing in the night – they don't even seem to be in the same ocean.

White (1835) – Black (1936) [A40] ***(D)***

White has misplayed the opening and Black has just planted a knight on d4. White has various ways to try to minimize his positional disadvantage, but instead of a deep battle for the key squares, White makes a surprisingly generous offer, which Black refuses.

10.Qc2?



White took two seconds for this move, which Black failed to anticipate or exploit. White's queen is hanging.

10...Ne7?

10...N×c2+ was better.

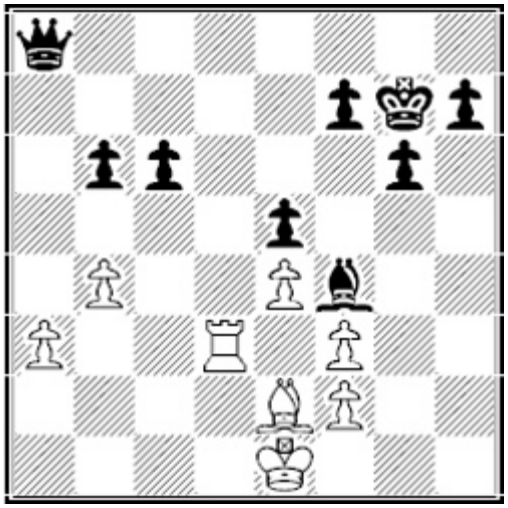
11.Qd1

White notices the problem and moves his queen back to d1. White may have been hoping for 11...Ng8, with a tacit agreement that neither player would ever speak of the last two moves, but instead Black castled, ending up with a gain of two tempos, as opposed to a free queen.

Five moves later, White managed to lose his queen anyway and eventually the players arrived at the following position: ***(D)***

With 24 seconds remaining, Black has many ways to wn. His h-pawn is dangerous, his c-pawn can also advance, and of course he has the hugematerial advantage of a queen for a rook.

Any infiltration by Black's queen into White's position will cause White fits.



With this in mind, Black chooses the most direct approach.

33...Q×a3? 34.Bd1?

White pre-moved this response to 33...Qa4, but 34.R×a3 was a much better answer to 33...Q×a3?, especially since 34.Bd1? also hangs White's rook.

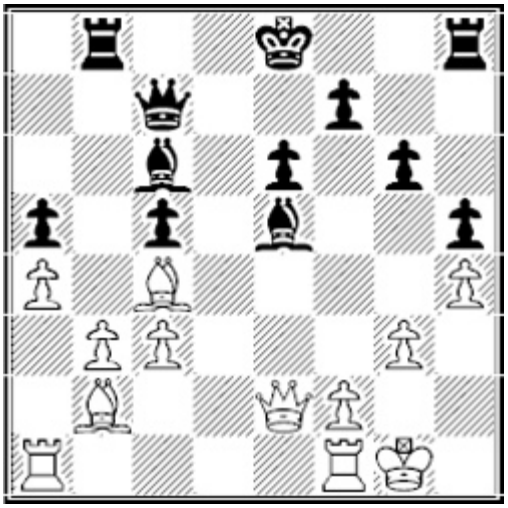
Sometimes two players almost seem to combine their efforts to create a work of art. That can't be said for this game.

34...Q×d3 0-1

The next examples illustrate the difference between wishful thinking and obsessing. Players indulge in wishful thinking when they appreciate that in the type of position they are in, in some other game, with some other players, there may be danger, but think "it can't happen here." Obsessing blanks this out and causes players to simply ignore what their opponents are doing.

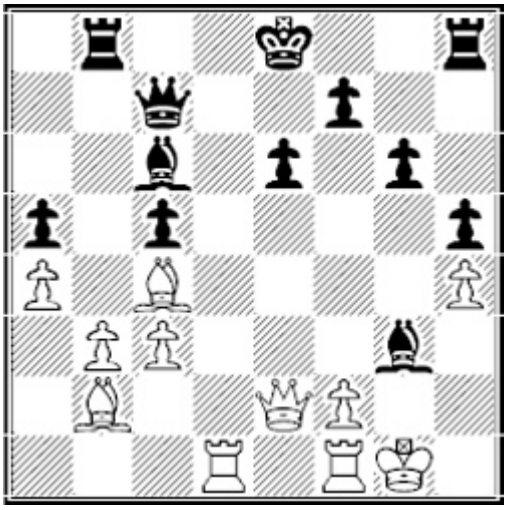
White (1991) – Black (1956) [A04] ***(D)***

White has an edge on the board but a slight deficit on the clock (36 seconds remaining vs. 41 seconds for Black).



After 24.f4, a fair amount of chess would remain to be played, for better or for worse. But White thinks only about Black's king, forgetting about his own.

24.Rad1? B×g3



Suddenly White's kingside is shattered, but White doesn't hesitate and unleashes a sacrifice which leads to mate...

25.B×e6? Bh2 mate 0-1

White is checkmated, so it's too late for any discovered checks.

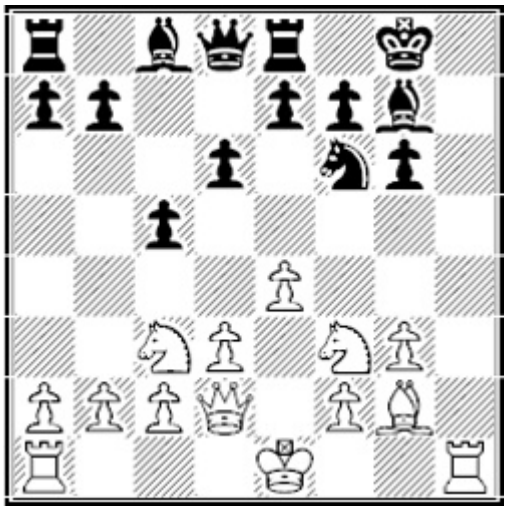
The next game follows the same theme. Black, in a slightly inferior position, conceives of a plan and simply follows it, even though White has clearly prevented it. Black just thought of what he wanted to do and failed to appreciate that his opponent got to move as well.

White (2007) – Black (1872) [A00]

1.d3 Nf6 2.g3 g6 3.Bg2 Bg7 4.Nc3 d6 5.Bd2 0-0 6.Qc1 Re8 7.Bh6 Bh8 8.h4 Ng4 9.h5

Fair enough, although without his dark-squared bishop, White really can't hope for much.

9...N×h6 10.Q×h6 Bg7 11.Qd2 Nd7 12.Nf3 Nf6 13.h×g6 h×g6 14.e4 c5

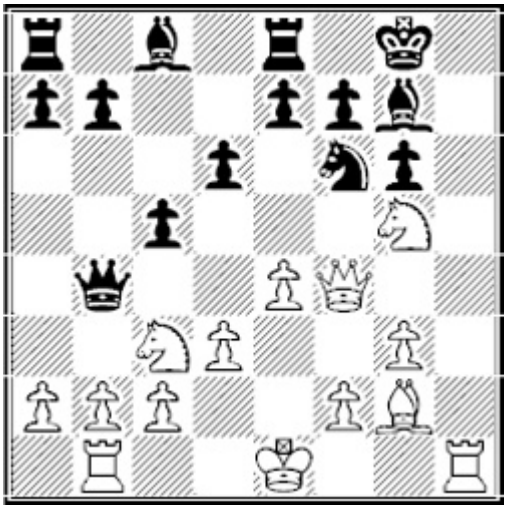


15.Ng5!?

White has actually developed some kingside pressure, although there is nothing definite. Black now begins a counterattack on the queenside, sharpening the play.

15...Qa5 16.Qf4 Qb4 17.Rb1

Now Black gets an idea. He decides to exploit the position of White's b1-rook and c3-knight by unmasking the fearsome power of his g7-bishop. But he is a bit too focused on his own plan and forgets he has a king.



17...Nh5? 18.Q×f7+

Oops.

18...Kh8 19.R×h5+ 1-0

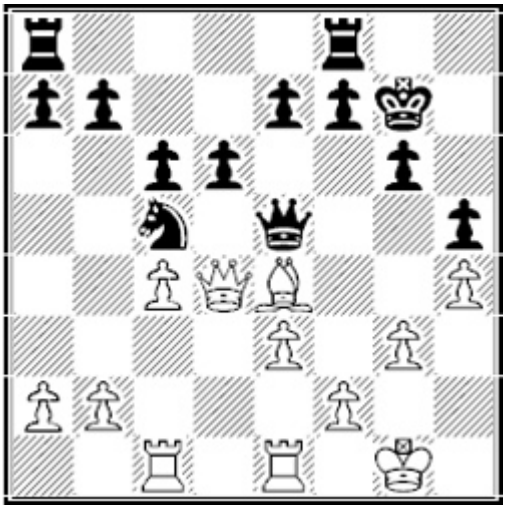
The next game clearly illustrates the danger of becoming entranced by an idea.

White (2033) – Black (1926) [A00]

1.g3 g6 2.Bg2 Bg7 3.d4 d6 4.Nf3 Nc6 5.0-0 Bd7 6.c4 Qc8 7.Re1 Bh3 8.Bh1 Bg4 9.Nc3 B×f3 10.B×f3 N×d4 11.Bg2 c6 12.Be3 Ne6 13.Qd2 Nf6 14.Rac1 0-0 15.Bh6 Nc7 16.B×g7 K×g7 17.h4 h5 18.Ne4 Qe6 19.Qd4 Qe5 20.Qd3 N×e4 21.B×e4 Ne6 22.e3 Nc5

After dropping a pawn in the opening, White blundered and allowed a knight fork which should cost him a bishop. There's nothing remarkable in that. But there are two additional mistakes which are worth our attention.

23.Qd4



23...Q×d4?

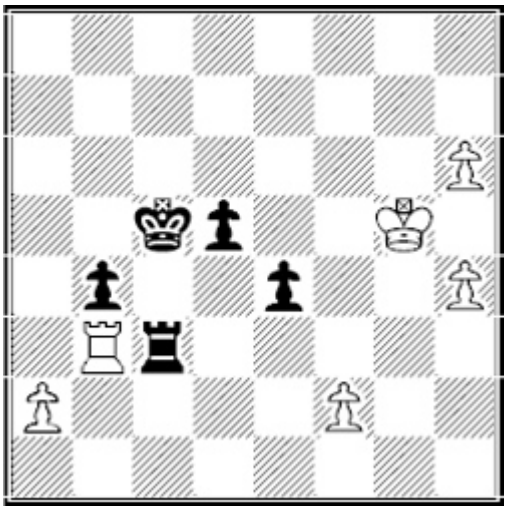
With 34 seconds left, Black saw that his queen was pinned, so his intended 23...Q×e4 was illegal. What he failed to see was that his queen was defended, so that 23...N×e4 would still win a piece. A second hallucination compounded Black's oversight, because he failed to notice that after 23...Q×d4?, exchanging queens. White's e1-rook defends his e4-bishop.

But the best is yet to come, as the players head into an eventful and imprecisely played double-rook ending.

24.e×d4 N×e4 25.R×e4 e6 26.Rce1 d5 27.c×d5 c×d5 28.R4e3 Rac8 29.Rb3 Rc7 30.Re2 Rfc8 31.Kg2 b6 32.Ra3 Kf6 33.Ree3 Ke7 34.Rf3 Kd6 35.Rfc3 R×c3 36.b×c3 Rc7 37.Kf3 a5 38.Kf4 Kc6 39.Ke5 Kb5 40.Kd6 Rc6+ 41.Ke5 Kc4 42.Rb3 b5 43.Kf6 b4 44.c×b4 a×b4 45.K×f7 K×d4 46.K×g6 Rc4 47.Kg5 e5 48.g4 e4 49.g×h5 Kc5 50.h6 Rc3 ***(D)***

By this point, White has 11 seconds left and Black has 12 seconds. 51.h7 is winning on the board, as White gets a new queen and Black doesn't, but

instead White becomes bewitched by a beautiful variation and makes an unsound combination.



51.R×c3+? b×c3 52.h7 c2 53.h8Q c1Q+

To his horror, White now discovers that his intended 54.Qc8+ and 55.Q×c1 is illegal, because by sheer chance Black has queened with check! The root cause of this oversight was the allure of White's concept, which would have been impressive in a bullet game had it been sound.

Black was able to use his two-second time edge to win what was otherwise a complicated queen ending which slightly favored White.

54.Kg6 Qd2

54...Qg1+!

55.Qc8+ Kd4 56.Qh8+ Kd3 57.Qf6 Qc3 58.Kf7 Q×f6+ 59.K×f6 d4 60.h5 e3 61.h6 e×f2 62.h7 f1Q+ 63.Ke6 Qh1 64.h8Q Q×h8 65.Kd5 Qa8+ 66.Kc5 Q×a2 67.Kd6 Qc2 68.Ke5 Kc3 69.Kf6 d3 0-1

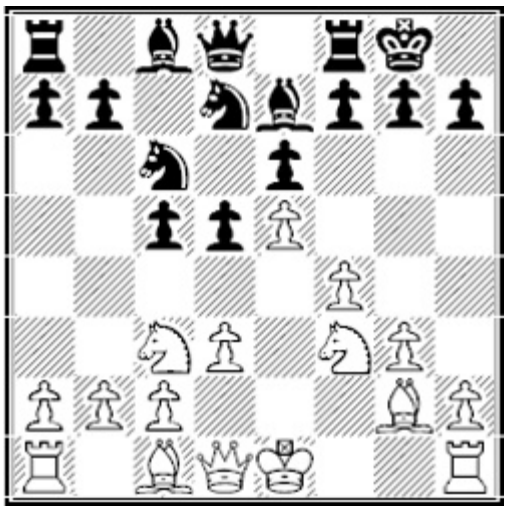
Inflexible thinking

As chess players gain more experience they discover and retain patterns, so that sequences of moves merge into a single concept rather than being a number of discrete events. These larger mental building blocks, which resemble molecules made from the atoms of single moves, are essential to chess strength and in top players can become surprisingly complex.

However, sometimes things go wrong and, under the time pressure of bullet, the wrong patterned response can emerge. It can be hard to shake such an automatic response, as the following examples show.

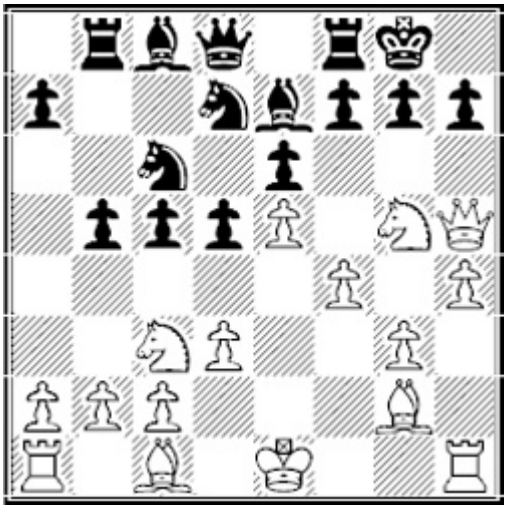
White (2024) – Black (2022) [A00]

1.g3 e6 2.Bg2 d5 3.d3 Nf6 4.Nc3 Be7 5.e4 0-0 6.e5 Nfd7 7.f4 c5 8.Nf3 Nc6

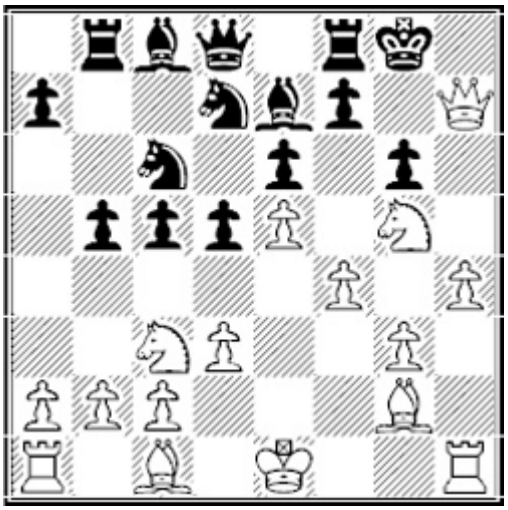


Here one would expect 9.0-0, with attacks on opposite sides of the board. Because he hasn’t yet castled, White has a dubious, but tricky, alternative.

9.h4!? Rb8 10.Ng5!? b5 11.Qh5



11...g6? 12.Q×h7 mate 1-0



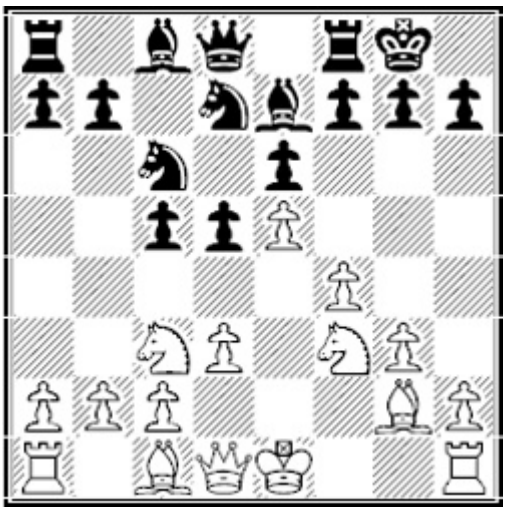
It’s mate! Well, these things happen in bullet and we all short circuit from time to time. Black obviously saw some sort of threat on the kingside, but his mind tricked him and for a split second (which is all the time he took to play 11...g6?) he must have thought that White’s queen was threatening h7 along the b1–h7 diagonal, rather than down the h-file.

Apart from its possible amusement value, this game is hardly worth comment, one might think. Black’s programming went wrong, lesson

learned, time for the next game.

But let’s look at another example...

White (1992) – Black (1923) [A00]

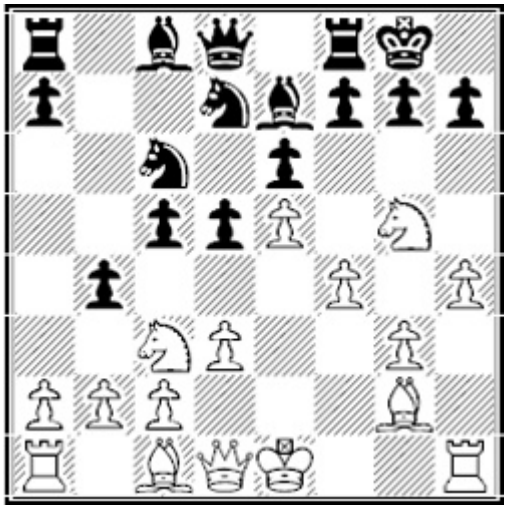


Here we go again. White plays the same move as in the previous game.

9.h4!? b5!?

A slight improvement over 9...Rb8, as White can’t take Black’s b5-pawn (10.N×b5? Qa5+ wins a piece). But bullet games are not always decided by such subtleties.

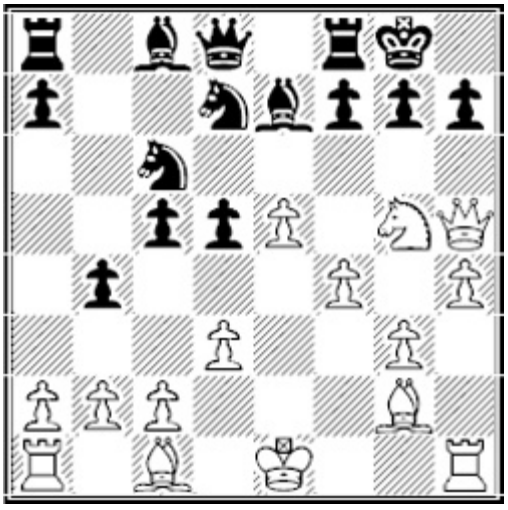
10.Ng5!? b4



11.N×d5?!

This is White's idea, but this sacrifice is dubious for reasons which will become apparent.

11...e×d5 12.Qh5



12...g6? 13.Q×h7 mate 1-0

Who would have expected lightning to strike twice? Can we learn something about the psychology of chess mistakes from these parallel

games? Maybe – since both games were played between the same opponents on the same day, about 15 minutes apart!

This is quite puzzling in some ways. In the second game, in which Black used only four seconds, he came up with a refinement in the opening (9...b5!?), proving that he realized he was playing the same opponent and remembered the previous game. Yet Black reacted to the same threat in the same way and fell for the same mate!

The only reasonable conclusion is that Black found it impossible to overcome his automatic response to the threat of Q×h7 mate, built up over years of play, even when a (very) recent experience in almost exactly the same position demonstrated that a different response was required. Black's instinct was to defend against Qh5 with ...g6, and it was not at all easy for him to shift gears and play the correct ....h6. Black might take some consolation from the fact that this same attack claimed a different bullet victim just a few days earlier, but maybe not...

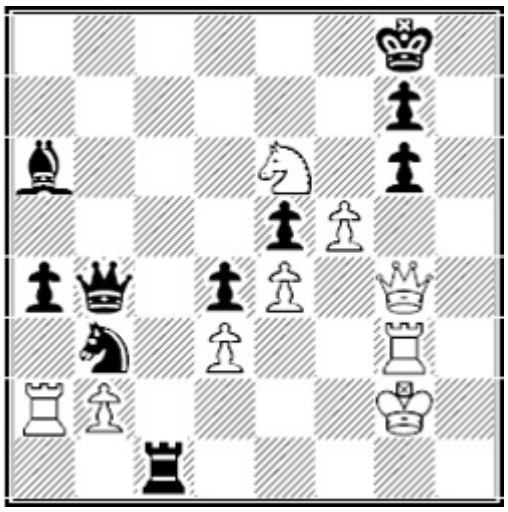
A final point is worth making. After the correct 12...h6 13.B×d5, White appears to have good compensation for his sacrificed piece, and a number of Black players have succumbed to White's attack. Only occasionally have Black players found 13...Nd×e5!, which completely refutes White's "attack." Sudden counterattacks are difficult to see, especially in bullet.

Optical illusions

This heading could equally be "hallucinations." Sometimes these hallucinations affect just one player, and sometimes both. We have seen examples of this previously, and will see them again.

In the next example, Black convinces himself that he has countered White's transparent threat, only to discover that his eyes played a trick on him.

White (2159) – Black (2271) [A00]



The position is very tense. Both players are attacking, and White's material advantage means little because of the awkward position of his a2-rook. White has 13 seconds left, while Black has only five seconds. Black has just played 38...Qb4.

39.Q×g6?!

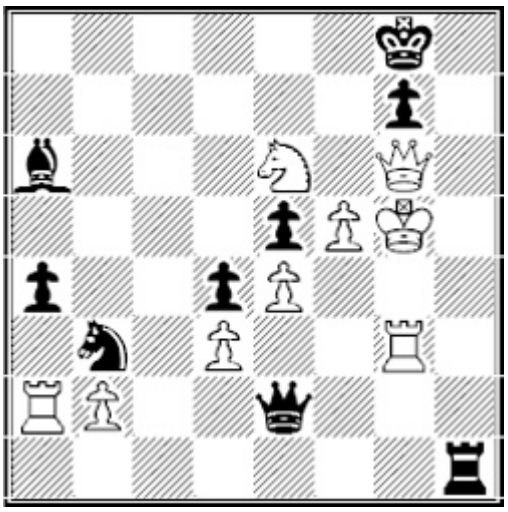
White needed more than the three seconds he spent here to find 39.Qg5!, which threatens mate (40.Qd8+ Kf7 41.Qf8 mate; or 40...Kh7 41.Rh2 mate) and covers d2. 40...Qd2+ 41.Q×d2 N×d2 then loses for Black, both on the board and because Black would be hopelessly behind on time.

39.Qg5! was difficult to find, and it's not surprising that White missed it. Instead he makes a plausible move, threatening the direct 40.Q×g7 mate. Black starts to check.

39...Qd2+ 40.Kh3 Rh1+

Black is now down to three seconds.

41.Kg4 Qe2+ 42.Kg5 Qd2+ 43.Kg4 Qe2+ 44.Kg5



Now White has only three seconds as well. There is no rational way for White to avoid the perpetual...

44...Qc2

Black took two seconds to make this move, which has an idea behind it. While Black had only a second left, White wasn't much better off, and an unexpected move can fluster the opponent. Here White couldn't afford to blank out for even a second, so Black gambled. After all, White's awkward king position on the g-file has broken the communication between White's g2-rook and g6-queen, defusing his attack on Black's g7-pawn.

Since Black was in a gambling mood, 44...Rh5+!? would have been a better bet, as White would had to have replied 45.Q×h5, and if White's mouse was

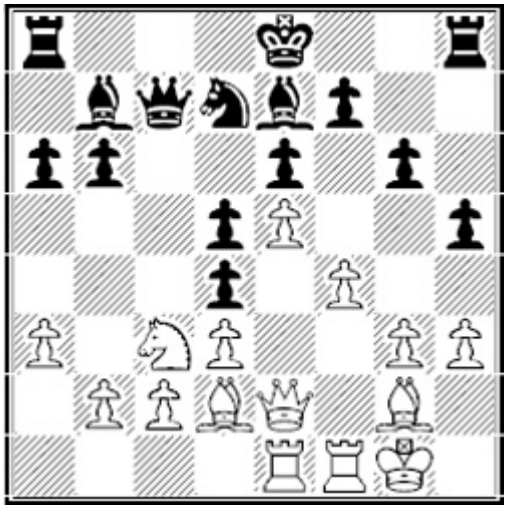
hovering on his king, that might have made all the difference. The other plus to 44...Rh5+!? is that it doesn't allow mate in one.

45.Q×g7 mate 1-0

The end of the optional illusion. White's e6-knight also supports the attack on Black's g7-pawn, and so White mates on the spot.

In the next game, both players miss all sorts of obvious moves, and only the benevolent intervention of a kibitzer saves White.

White (2190) – Black (2051) [A00]



In this position, where Black has just recaptured on d4, White decides to accept a kibitz and make a speculative sacrifice on d5. Both sides have over 45 seconds remaining.

16.N×d5?! B×d5 17.B×d5 e×d5 18.e6

This is White's idea. He hopes to destroy Black's pawn chain and pick up enough pawns to restore the material balance, while at the same time

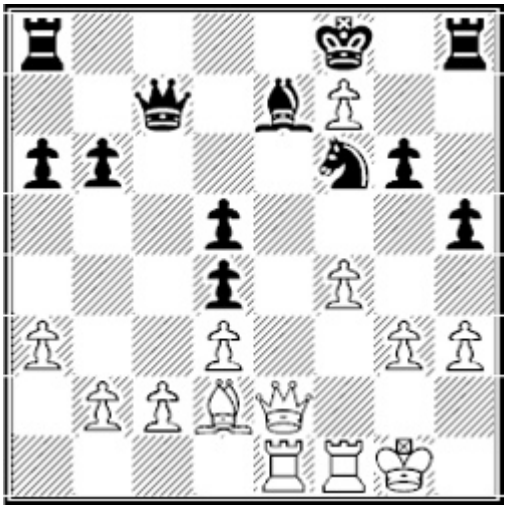
exposing Black’s king to attack.

Since the initiative is so important in bullet White’s sacrifice gives him good practical chances. Often the sudden opening of a position after a sacrifice throws the defender off balance and causes mistakes. Here White runs into this problem as well, because 16.N×d5?! was kibitzed and the resulting position surprised White as much as it did Black...

18...Nf6

18...Nf8!? was safer.

19.e×f7+ Kf8



20.f5?

After 20.Qe5!, the position would be completely unclear, which would likely have been to White’s advantage in a bullet game. The move played has a tactical flaw.

20...g5?

Sharing his opponent's moment of blindness, Black overlooks the "obvious" 20...Q×g3+.

21.Kg2!

White sees that his g3-pawn was hanging and defends it.

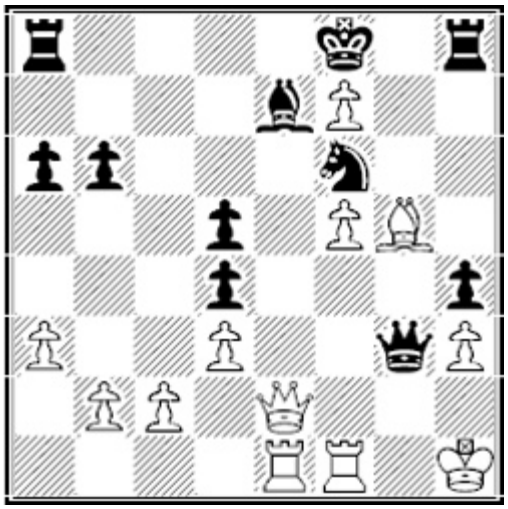
21...h4

Alerted to White's weak pawn on g3 because White defended it with his king, Black renews his attack.

22.B×g5?

And now White doesn't see it! After 22.g×h4 g×h4 23.Bf4, the position is unclear.

22...Q×g3+ 23.Kh1



23...Q×g5?

Black, caught up in the excitement of breaking through to White's king, forgets about his own.

24.Q×e7+

After five seconds thought – or rather argument. In fact, White was about to resign when the helpful kibitzer pointed out forcefully that he had mate. At first White was convinced that he was the one being mated. The psychic bonds between the two opponents were so strong that an intervention was required to break them...

24...Kg7 25.f8Q mate 1-0

Kibitzing

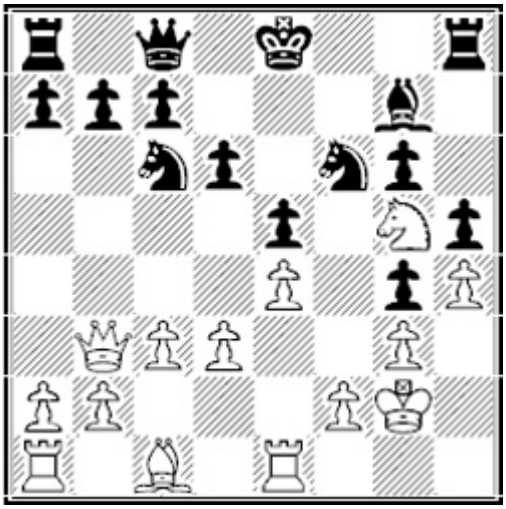
This raises the delicate subject of kibitzing. Playing bullet is fun, and playing with a friend is even more fun. We contrast kibitzing to the abhorrent use of computers in internet chess, which is cheating pure and simple.

Kibitzing is, in our view, socially acceptable, especially in bullet since it is difficult to kibitz properly. Often kibitzing results in worse, not better, results but it's fun anyway!

For kibitizing in bullet to be useful, the communication has to be almost instant and clear. There is usually no time to argue or sort out confusion.

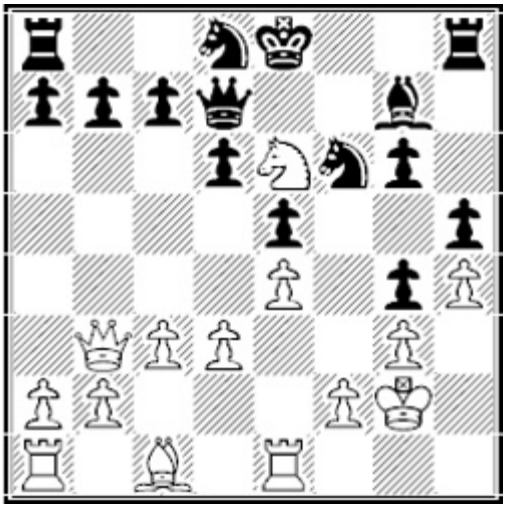
Here are a few examples of kibitizing gone wrong, although the games end happily.

White (1957) – Black (2077) [A04]



White has unsoundly sacrificed a piece for the threat of 16.Qf7+. In this game, Black had the dubious benefit of kibitzers, but before any suggestions could be made, Black played...

15...Qd7 16.Ne6 Nd8



White's last move threatened nothing, so Black could have saved his b7-pawn with 16...Rb8. But 16...Nd8 threatens to exchange White's knight, and rather than allow his only dangerous piece to be eliminated, White retreats.

17.Ng5 Nf7

This move, the product of three seconds thought, accomplishes little, as White's knight just returns to e6.

18.Ne6

Black, despite his extra piece, is clearly going in circles, as the kibitzers rudely pointed out.

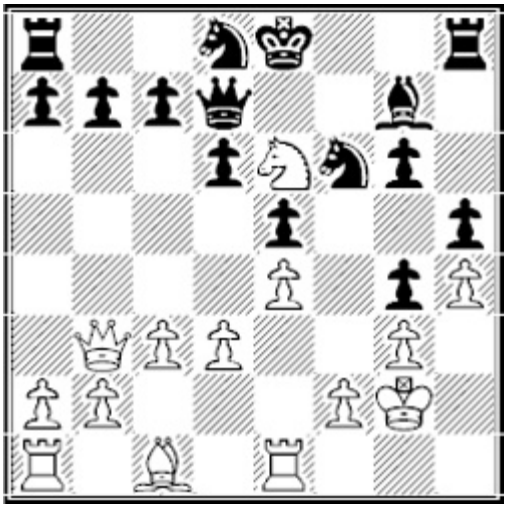
18...Nd8

At the demand of the kibitzers, Black returns his wayward knight to d8.

19.Ng5 Nc6?!

This move was the result of a communication problem, as the kibitzers called for 19...c6, allowing Black's queen to defend his b7-pawn. But Black thought they were saying "...Nc6," and so Black repeated the position again.

20.Ne6 Nd8?



Chagrined by the misunderstanding, Black hastens to correct his error by returning his knight to d8, overlooking a surprising resource.

21.Ng5?

White forgets the game is being played on a server where repeating the position three times isn't enough – you have to claim the draw! By doing so, White would have secured a half-point, although perhaps he was playing to win...

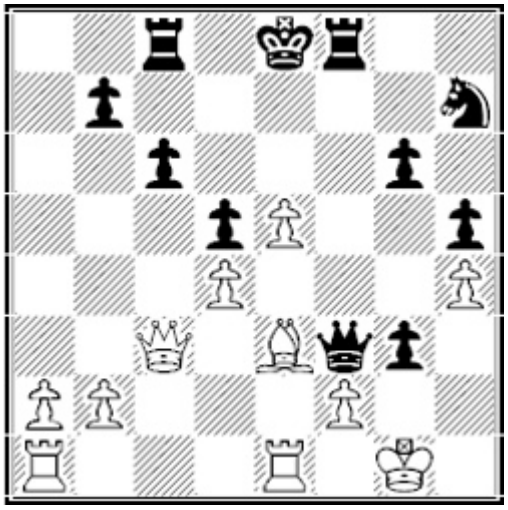
21...c6!

After all the confusion and misadventures, Black has 37 seconds left to his opponent's 44 seconds. He also still has his extra piece.

22.Bd2 Rf8 23.Be3 Rc8 24.B×a7 Nf7 25.Be3 N×g5 26.B×g5 Nh7 27.Be3 Bf6 28.d4 e×d4 29.c×d4 Qf7 30.Qc3

A piece down, White instinctively avoids the exchange of queens, but his eight-second lead in time would have left the issue seriously in doubt. Now Black begins a direct attack, and time does not become a significant factor.

30...d5 31.e5 B×h4?! 32.g×h4 Qf3+ 33.Kg1 g3



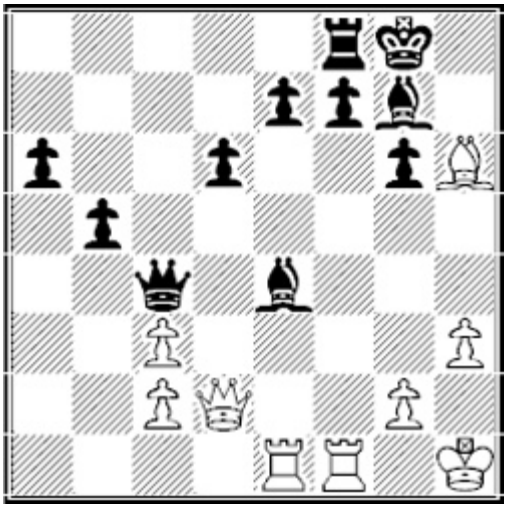
34.e6

Missing 34.Qc2!, when the position on the board is unclear and the position on the clock favors White (about 30 seconds to 22 seconds).

34...g×f2+ 35.B×f2 Q×f2+ 36.Kh1 Q×h4+ 37.Kg2 Rf2+ 38.Kg1 Qh2 mate 0-1

Here is another example of mis-communication.

White (2156) – Black (2180) [B06]



After a “standard” (although not quite sound) exchange sacrifice on c3, Black has obtained an advantage. He also has 28 seconds remaining, against White’s 23 seconds. This time advantage, combined with the fact that his position is easier to play, gives him good prospects of victory.

At this key point in the game, Black received a helpful kibitz: “...Bc3,” by which 25...B×c3 is intended. 25...B×c3 is indeed the strongest move, winning a third pawn for the exchange and simplifying the position.

However, Black heard the kibitz as “...Bc6” and trustingly played...

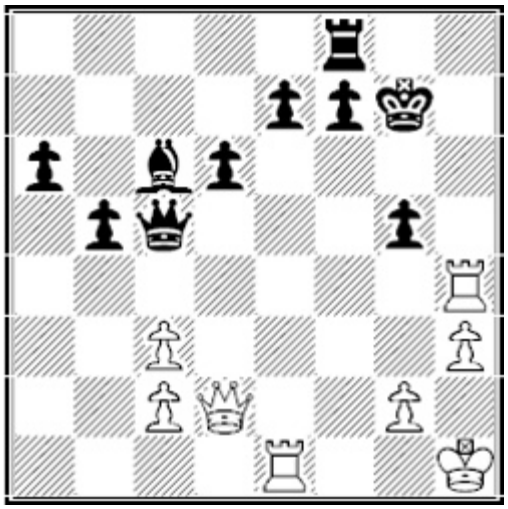
25...Bc6? 26.B×g7 K×g7 27.Rf4!

27.R×e7? loses to 27...Q×f1+.

27...Qc5 28.Rh4!?

28.R×e7! was simpler, after which White stands better on the board, and worse on the clock (by four seconds).

28...g5



29.Rh5?!

29.Rg4! was safer, as Black's e7-pawn is still hanging. Surprisingly, though, 28.Rh5?! should work too.

29...Kg6 30.R×g5+?

Now White's resurgence comes to a sad and premature end. White had a spectacular win with 30.Qd3+! f5 (30...K×h5 31.Qh7 mate) 31.R×g5+! K×g5 32.Qg3+ Kf6 33.Qh4+ Kg6 34.R×e7, and Black can only avoid mate by giving up his queen with 34...B×g2+ 35.Kh2! Qe5+.

This combination, which in part is based on the possibility of R×e7, was hard to see. It is easy to understand how White missed 30.Qd3+!, which forces 30...f5, cutting off Black's c5-queen from the defence of his g5-pawn, and allows White to bring his queen to g3 after 31.R×g5+.

30...Q×g5

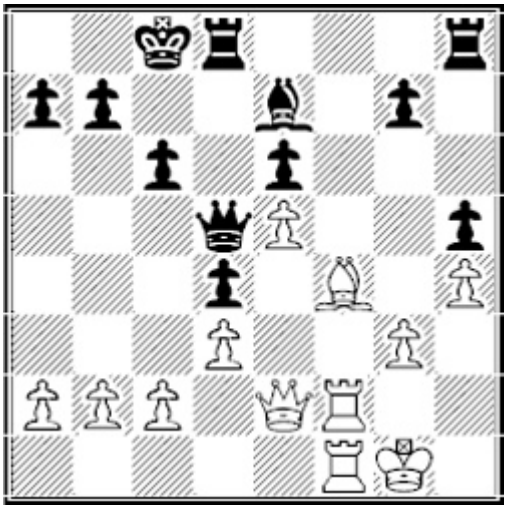
For the first time since 25...Bc6?, Black can breathe easily.

31.Qd3+ Kg7 32.Qe2 Rh8 33.Rg1? R×h3 mate 0-1

Greed

No catalogue of chess sins would be complete without a mention of greed. Sometimes it is just impossible not to grab material, and this can be just as dangerous in bullet as in any other form of chess.

White (2334) – Black (2141) [A00]



In this position, Black has a lead in time (43 seconds remaining to White's 35 seconds) and a slight advantage on the board. Black should continue with 21...Rdg8!, preparing 22...g5. Instead Black makes a small slip, followed by a serious blunder.

21...Rhf8 22.Q×h5 Q×a2

Pawn hunting is a typical mistake, and is especially risky in bullet, because with his queen out of play Black must follow up precisely in order to avoid getting into trouble. White's a-pawn just isn't worth the time and trouble.

23.b3 Qa3?!

23...Qa5 was better, to bring Black's queen back to d5.

24.Qg6! Kb8?! 25.Q×e6

White has not only greatly improved his position, but Black has lost his lead in time.

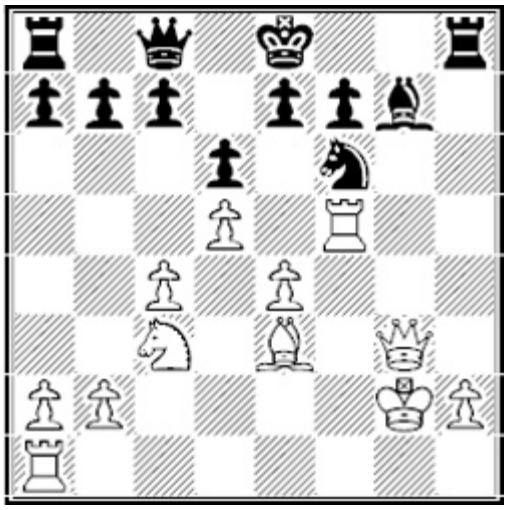
25...Qc5 26.Qg6 a6 27.Q×g7 Ka8 28.Bg5! B×g5? 29.R×f8 Be3+ 30.Kh2 Q×c2+ 31.Kh3 R×f8 32.Q×f8+ Ka7 33.e6 Qe2? 34.Qc5+ 1-0

With 16 seconds left, White has time to work out the mate, so Black resigned.

One can't always count on the opponent's greed to justify a combination, but the odds are pretty good that if material is offered, the offer will be accepted.

The next example illustrates this very well. Black sacrifices both rooks and White can't help himself from taking them, even though he would have been better off refusing the second helping.

White (2415) – Black (2873) [A04]



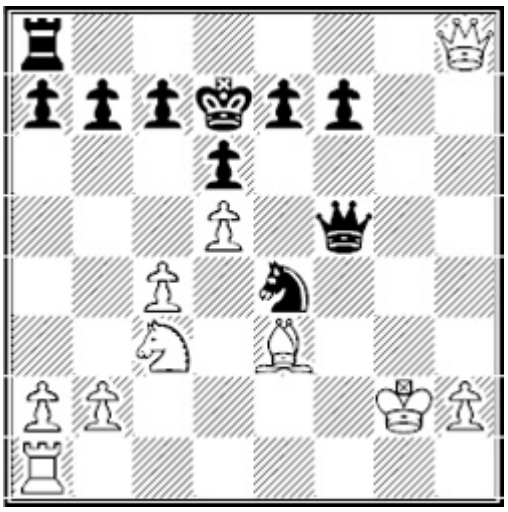
In this tense position, Black has 48 seconds remaining, while White has 44 seconds. Time is therefore not yet an important factor.

Objectively 17...Qd7, followed by 18...0-0-0, was best, but Black, sensing that the time has come to strike, decides to confuse things with a sacrifice.

17...N×e4!? 18.Q×g7

Forced, as 18.N×e4? loses to 18...Q×f5.

18...Q×f5 19.Q×h8+ Kd7



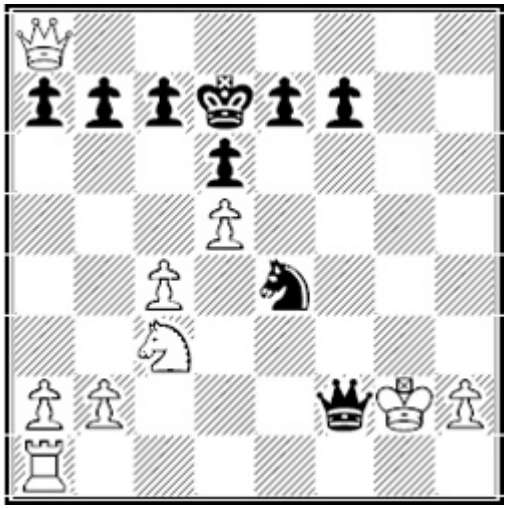
20.Q×a8?

Chessplayers, like everyone else, usually can resist everything but temptation...

There are several reasons why White may have taken the second rook. He may have been fatalistic, thinking that whatever was going to happen was destined to happen. He may have thought Black was bluffing. Or, most likely, he may have taken Black's other rook out of sheer greed.

After 20.Qg7! Rh8! 21.Q×h8 Qg4+ 22.Kh1 Qf3+ 23.Kg1 Q×e3+, Black has perpetual check, but nothing more. Both 20.Qg7! and 20...Rh8! are difficult moves to find in bullet, as they involve finding the delicate balance between attack and defense.

20...Qg4+ 21.Kh1 Qf3+ 22.Kg1 Q×e3+ 23.Kg2 Qf2+

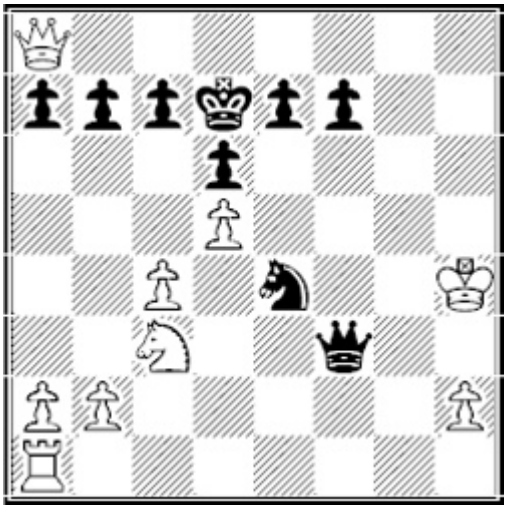


24.Kh3

24.Kh1 fails to 24...Ng5! 25.Qh8 Qf3+ 26.Kg1 Nh3+, and White must surrender his queen.

The contrast with the variation given above (20.Qg7!) is striking – it makes a big difference whether White's queen is on a8 or h8!, as on h8 White's queen helps defend White's king.

24...Qf3+ 25.Kh4



25...f5 26.Qg8 Qf4+ 27.Kh5 Nf6+ 0-1

Chapter 16

Psych Outs

The best mistakes are the ones you get your opponent to make. If, as one grandmaster said, “the idea of chess is to trick the other guy” then bullet gives players ample opportunity to do so.

Many of the examples in this book involve “tricking the other guy.” With only one minute for the entire game, players inevitably miss tactics and wander down strategic dead ends. At times, however, it is possible to go farther than that and blur the line between fantasy and reality. In bullet, much more than in normal chess, it is possible to “psych out” the opponent – or to psych yourself out without even realizing it...

“Psych outs” cover a wide range of conjuring tricks, all of which wind up convincing the victim that things are other than as they really are. In one sense, psych outs are the epitome of bullet, and the results are always entertaining when bullet magicians practice their art.

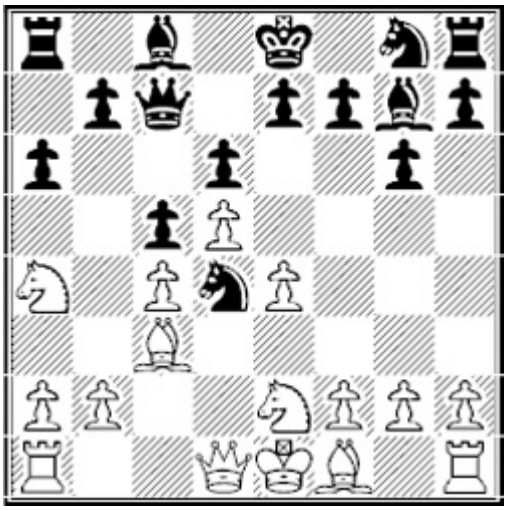
When a player is dragged into the twilight zone in bullet almost anything can happen. It’s as though the laws of chess no longer apply, and the analogy with magic is apt. When up is down and left is right and the clock is ticking, it’s no wonder that strange things happen.

Let’s take a trip down the rabbit hole of bullet chess and see what goes on when one player manages to get into the other player’s head.

Illusions

One result of psyching someone out in bullet is to create an illusion. It often happens that the magic used is so powerful that both players fall prey to the same illusion. Witness the following example.

White (1946) – Black (2111) [A40]



After an inexact opening by both players, White has achieved his opening goal and is about to destroy Black's only good piece – his d4-knight. Both players have over 45 seconds remaining. With little to lose, Black counterattacks.

14...b5?!

Both 14...e5 and 14...Bg4, with the idea of sacrificing a piece for two pawns after 15.f3 B×f3, were better. Black is trying to psych his opponent out.

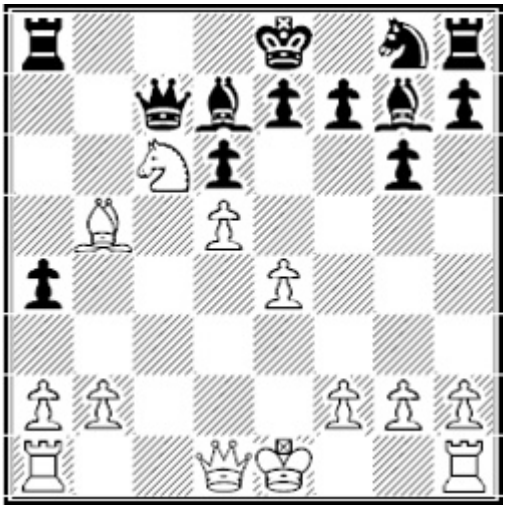
15.B×d4?

15.N×d4! gave White a clear advantage.

15...c×d4

Even if he didn’t win material, Black would be happy with the disappearance of White’s dark-squared bishop.

16.c×b5 a×b5 17.N×d4 b×a4 18.Bb5+ Bd7 19.Nc6



White is just a piece down, with little to show for it other than his c6-knight. Both players had 40 seconds left, so White also had little hope of running Black out of time.

Both players understood that Black was winning and that little more was required to push White over the edge into resignation. Black therefore played...

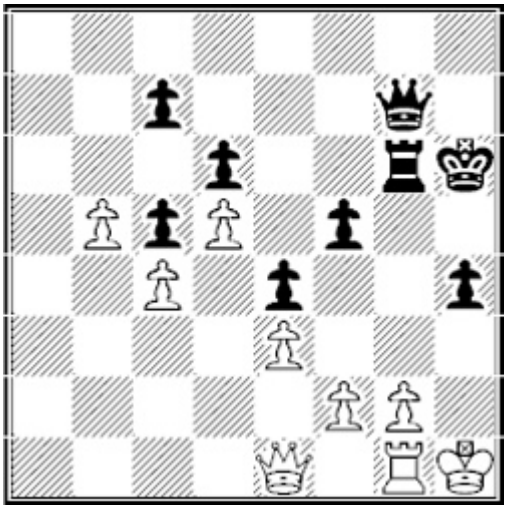
19...Qa5+? 0-1

...and White resigned!

It is common to overlook backwards moves, and here both players missed 20.N×a5, a backwards knight move. Instead of taking Black’s queen, White joined in the hallucination and, thinking he was about to lose his b5-bishop, he dutifully resigned.

In the next example, Black sacrifices a rook, and the spell holds.

White (2055) – Black (2188) [A04]



After a fairly conventional and well-played game, by bullet standards, the players have arrived at an approximately equal position. However, Black has two advantages, one of which is very real and one of which is intangible.

The first is that he has a ten-second lead in time: 19 seconds to nine seconds. The second is that his position looks menacing. White's king is confined to the corner and Black has more space on the kingside.

Taking these two factors into account, Black unleashed...

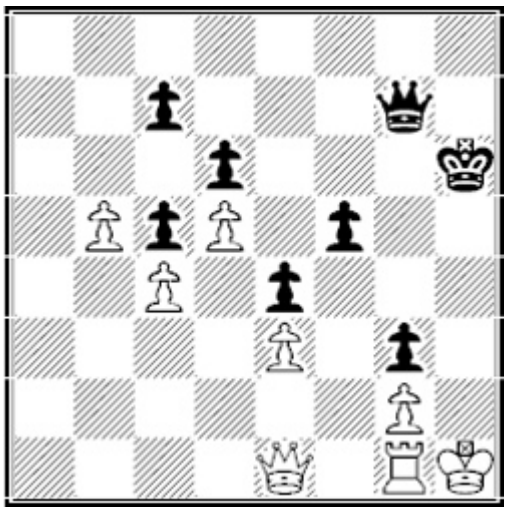
39...Rg3?!

The only problem with this move is that it is completely unsound.

40.f×g3!

After a second or two, White accepts the sacrifice. He could have ignored it since 39...Rg3?! doesn’t threaten anything, but a rook’s a rook.

40...h×g3



41.Qf1?

Played instantly. Again, we adhere strictly to our convention of never giving two question marks to a bullet move, but 41.Qf1? is a truly horrible move. Succumbing to the optical illusion that he is about to be mated down the h-file, White launches a desperate counterattack against Black’s king.

In fact, there is no mate because Black’s king blocks the h-file. After 41.Rf1, Black is just down a rook, because White’s king escapes to e2.

41...Kg6

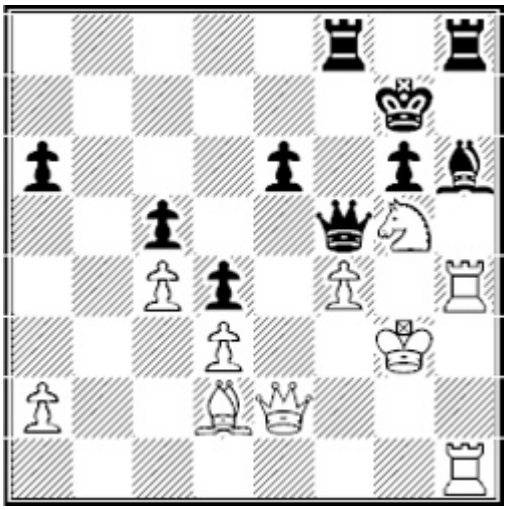
Now it’s over. White has nothing better than to give up his queen in order to stave off mate.

42.Q×f5+ K×f5 43.Rf1+ Ke5 44.Rf4 Qh6+... 0-1

White ran out of time a few moves later.

In the previous game, it might have been that White was somehow tricked into mixing up Black's king and queen. In the next example, White does this all on his own.

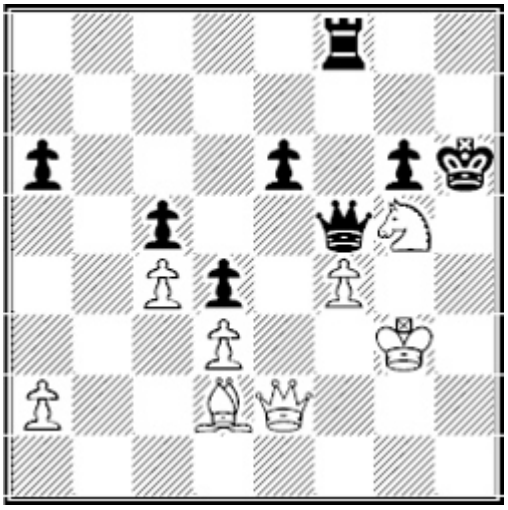
White (1912) – Black (2171) [A00]



White is winning and, with 22 seconds remaining to his opponent's 31 seconds, he has a pleasant choice. One option is 32.N×e6+, which wins huge amounts of material and leaves Black with no play.

White thought for a few seconds and saw something prettier.

32.R×h6!? R×h6 33.R×h6 K×h6



The point of White's exchange sacrifice is now apparent. After 34.Qh2+ Kg7 35.Qh7+ Kf6 36.Ne4+, Black must give up his queen in order to avoid immediate mate. Simple enough, you would think, especially since White played for this position.

34.Kh4?

One could be forgiven for thinking that there couldn't possibly be a non-medical explanation for this move, but in fact there is. White thought his king was his queen and therefore played "34.Kh4+" intending to follow up with 34...Kg7 35.Kh7+.

34...e5?! 35.Kg3?

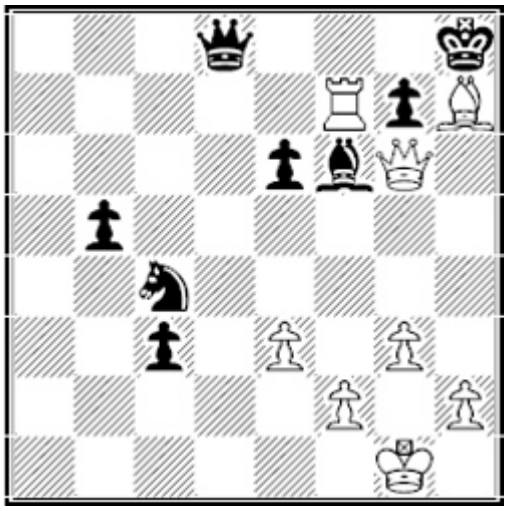
Rattled by his hallucination, White falls apart. After 35.f×e5, he would still be winning.

35...e×f4+ 36.Kf3 Q×g5 ... 0-1

Confusion

Closely related to the creation of illusions is the somewhat more mundane trick of confusing the opponent. Many of the mistakes in this book stem from a degree of confusion, but sometimes this is brought to such a high level that it deserves special recognition.

White (2090) – Black (2414) [E06]



To be clear at the outset, Black is lost. Apart from a time advantage of 27 seconds remaining to White's 19 seconds, he is behind in material and his king is under severe attack.

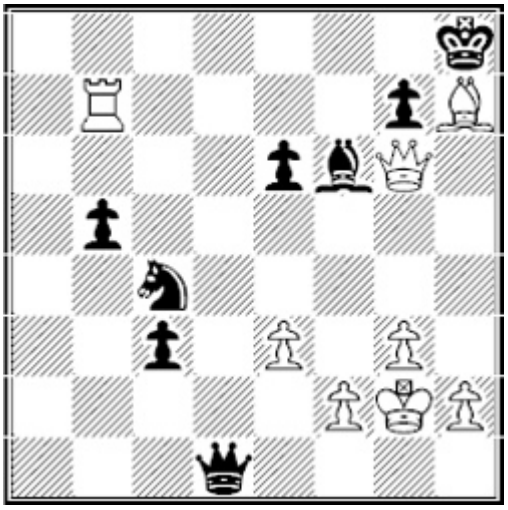
29.Rb7?

Played after three seconds thought. 29.Qh5!, which forces mate, would have resolved the matter immediately. Now things get more interesting.

29...Qd1+

Black counterattacks, if only to remind White that he has a king as well.

30.Kg2



30...Qd5+!?

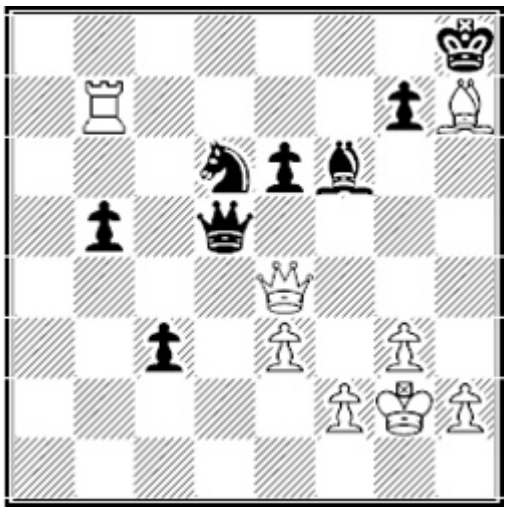
Black plays to win. After all, if he can avoid mate, his queenside pawns give him counterplay, and he is ahead on time. 30...N×e3+!? 31.f×e3 Qe2+ draws by perpetual check, but Black wants more.

As is often the case, playing to win involves some risk. Bullet chess tends to illustrate chess principles more vividly than does normal chess, and here 30...Qd5+!? immediately lands Black back in a losing position.

31.Qe4!

The right response. Now Black plays a tricky move.

31...Nd6!?



Pins and forks! White's queen is pinned to his king by Black's queen, and Black's knight forks White's queen and rook. Black's knight also defends his b5-pawn, so 31...Nd6!? seems like an all-purpose move which solves Black's problems. But in fact it's all smoke and mirrors and White can win immediately.

32.Q×d5?

White could dispel the illusion with 32.Rb8+!, which mates by exploiting the main drawback to 31...Nd6!? – Black's queen no longer controls d8. Pinned or not, White's queen still defends his h7-bishop.

After 32...Nc8 33.Q×d5 e×d5 34.Bg6!, Black's knight and bishop can't talk to one another, other than to say goodbye.

32...e×d5

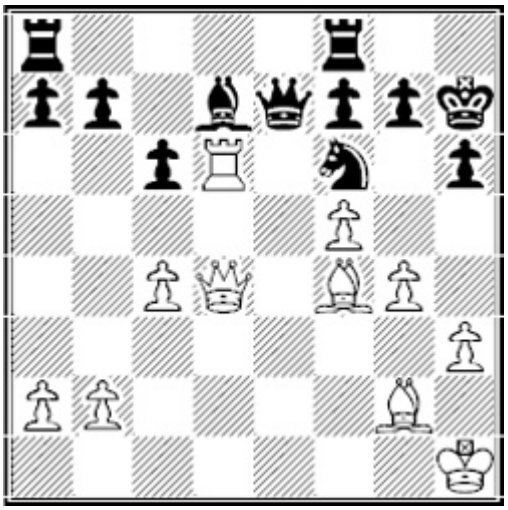
To add insult to injury, White now loses a piece.

33.Rb8+ K×h7 ... 0-1

With a massive material advantage and a big lead in time (21 seconds to seven seconds), Black had no trouble bringing home the point.

The next example features another improbable save as White manages to muddy the waters to such an extent that Black loses his way.

White (1959) – Black (1973) [A00]

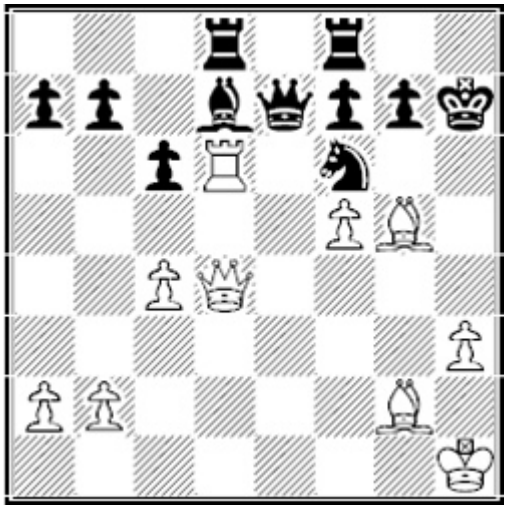


White has a lead in time (30 seconds remaining, against Black's 21 seconds), but otherwise his position is bad. He is a full rook behind, and the open d-file promises a quick exchange of his remaining rook. If White is to try anything, he has to do it now.

27.g5 h×g5 28.B×g5 Rad8 ***(D)***

Lining up on the h4-d8 diagonal is a bit risky. The simplest approach was to give back some material with 28...B×f5! 29.Qh4+ Kg8 30.R×f6 Qe5!, and White's clumsy f6-rook contributes little to his attack.

29.Qh4+

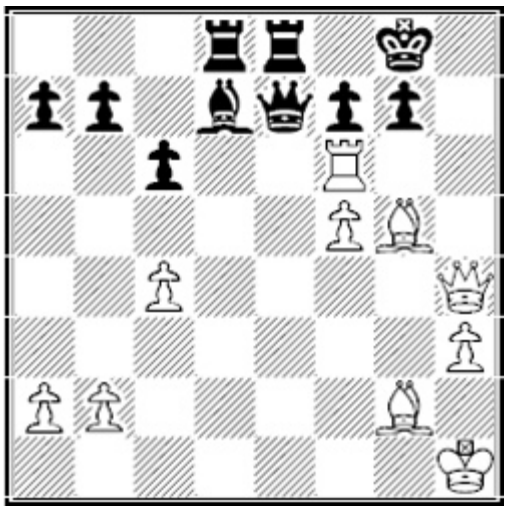


29.B×f6 g×f6 30.Qg4+ would draw by perpetual check, but White plays to win! What's a rook?

29...Kg8 30.R×f6

Here is White's idea. 30...g×f6? 31.B×f6 costs Black his queen, so Black has to find something better and he has a little over ten seconds to do it.

30...Rfe8

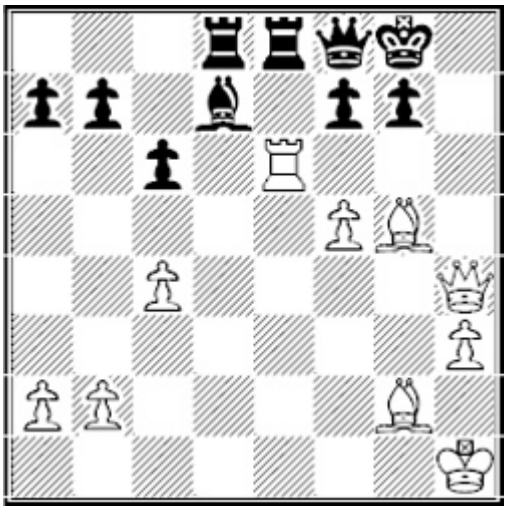


Black frees f8 for his king and, more importantly, threatens to kill White's attack with 31...Qe1+!, exchanging queens. White therefore pulls a rabbit out of his hat, and the rabbit steals more time from Black, who must now meet a problem-like move.

31.Re6!

This move not only boggles Black – it is also the only move to prolong the game! Normal play leaves White with little hope because of Black's threat to exchange queens.

31...Qf8?



Black cracks under the pressure. After 31...Qb4!, he would still be winning, for while Black's d8-rook is hanging, so is White's e6-rook. 32.B×d8 f×e6 33.f6! Q×b2! leaves Black on top, but this is a difficult defense to find with only seconds left.

32.Be7

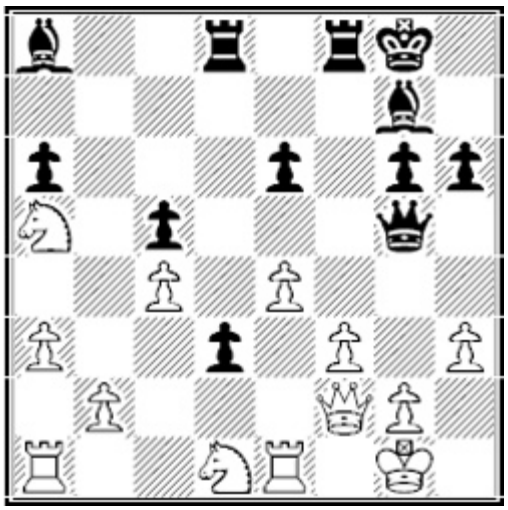
Even stronger was 32.Rh6!, which wins Black's queen after 32...g×h6 33.B×h6, but the damage is done in any case. With 17 seconds left, against Black's three seconds, the outcome is not in doubt.

32...R×e7 33.R×e7 B×f5 34.R×f7 1-0

34.R×f7 is the kind of move you can play in bullet when your opponent is about to forfeit on time, which is exactly what Black did.

In the next example, the tactics fly as Black conjures and White misses numerous defenses. In the end the spell succeeds and White blunders. The danger in such play, as should already be apparent, is that you can end up tricking yourself and miss objectively winning moves because of your own illusions.

White (2239) – Black (2315) [B06]



In this complicated position, White has an extra pawn, while Black has two bishops and many open lines. Objectively the position is about equal, but Black's position is easier to play because he is attacking. White has 29 seconds remaining to Black's 23 seconds.

26.Ne3?!

A mistake which allows Black's d3-pawn to advance. It was better for White to bring his wayward a5-knight back into play with 26.Nb3.

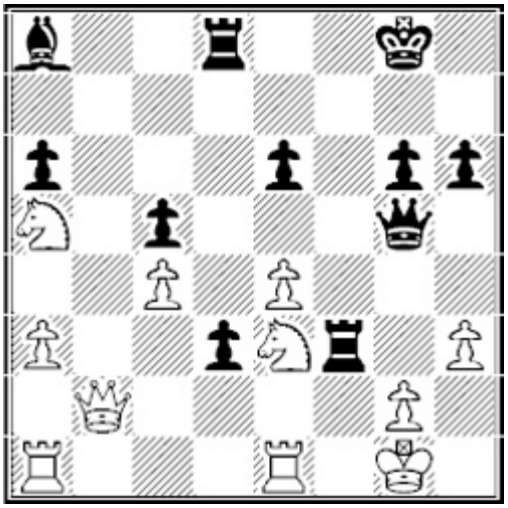
26...B×b2?!

A miscalculation, although 26....B×b2?! is not all that bad if followed up correctly. 26...d2! 27.Re2 Rd3! was much stronger, however, and would have given Black a fairly straightforward but much less entertaining win.

27.Q×b2

Black may have missed this sideways move.

27...R×f3?



Now Black is losing. 27...d2! 28.Re2 R×f3 was unclear.

28.Qd2?!

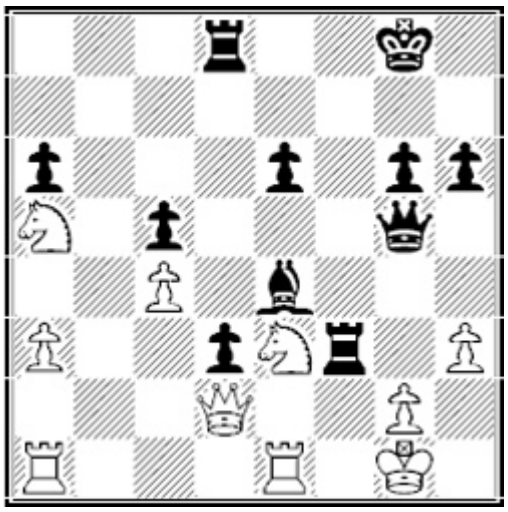
White rushes to blockade Black's dangerous d3-pawn, but in doing so misses 28.h4! Qg3 29.Nf1. This defensive resource, which was not easy to see, wins another exchange and kills Black's attack.

White now has 23 seconds remaining, while Black has 18 seconds.

28...B×e4 ***(D)***

Black also misses the idea of h3-h4, as otherwise he would have continued with 28...R×h3!, with complications.

29.Nf1?



A seemingly powerful move, made after two seconds thought. White offers an exchange of queens while unmasking an attack on Black's e4-bishop. But White has missed Black's reply. 29.h4! still won for White.

29...R×f1+! 30.K×f1 Q×d2

Suddenly White's position has collapsed.

31.R×e4 Qb2 32.Rae1 d2 33.Rd1 Qc2 0-1

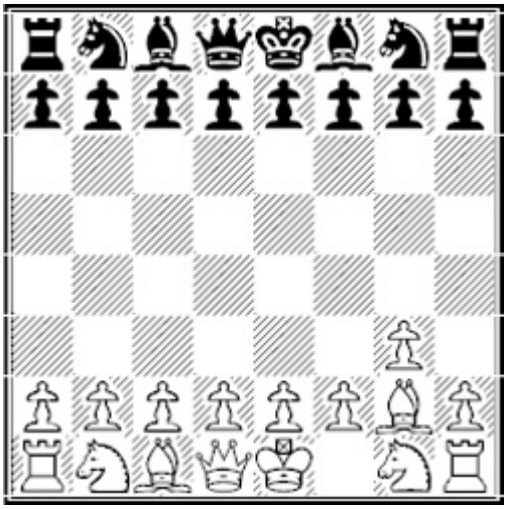
White loses a rook, so he resigned. Black had 13 seconds left.

Suckering your opponent

In Chapter 14, we discussed the most common mistakes, and in that chapter and elsewhere we have seen how these mistakes can be exploited. After refuting Black's bullet opening in the next game, White deliberately allows his opponent to make a move, anticipating that he would overlook a sideways move which prevented it.

White (1990) – Black (2112) [A00]

1.g3 Nf6 2.Bg2 Ng8



A typical bullet opening. Black's idea is not only to get in two quick pre-moves, but also to provoke his opponent into a frenzy and thereby induce errors. As an added bonus, if Black manages to win despite his first two moves, he will occupy the high ground for gloating.

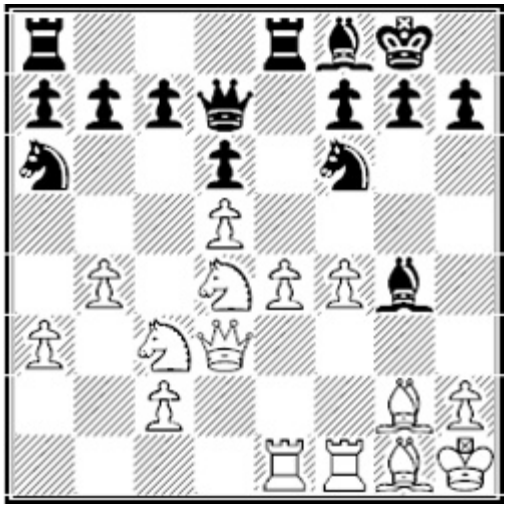
Black is skating on thin ice, though, as spotting your opponent two moves is not something to be sneezed at. And there is the added risk that your

opponent will steadfastly refuse to be provoked, as happens here. White simply develops calmly and builds up an impressive positional advantage.

3.d3 Nf6 4.Nc3 Nc6 5.e4 d6 6.f4 Nd7 7.Nf3 e5 8.0-0 e×f4 9.g×f4 Be7 10.d4 0-0 11.d5 Ncb8 12.Be3 Nc5 13.Qd2 Nbd7 14.Kh1 Nf6 15.Nd4 Re8 16.Rae1 Bf8 17.Bg1 Bg4 18.b4 Na6 19.a3 Qd7 20.Qd3! ***(D)***

It's time to assess what Black has managed to gain for his troubles. His position is bad, of course, but in return he has a seven-second lead in time (48 seconds left to White's 41 seconds).

White's last move sets a nasty trap, into which Black plunges head first. Anticipating an attempt by Black to exchange the light-squared bishops, White prevents 20...Bh3. Black, still moving as fast as possible, is not so easily dissuaded...



20...Bh3? 21.B×h3 Qe7 22.e5 Nh5 23.Qf3 g6 24.e6 f5 25.N×f5 g×f5 26.Q×h5 c5 27.d×c6 b×c6 28.Bd4! c5 29.Rg1+ Bg7 30.B×g7 Q×g7 31.R×g7+

With 27 seconds left, White should have seen 31.Qf7+ Kh8 32.Q×g7 mate, but Black's king is hardly going anywhere.

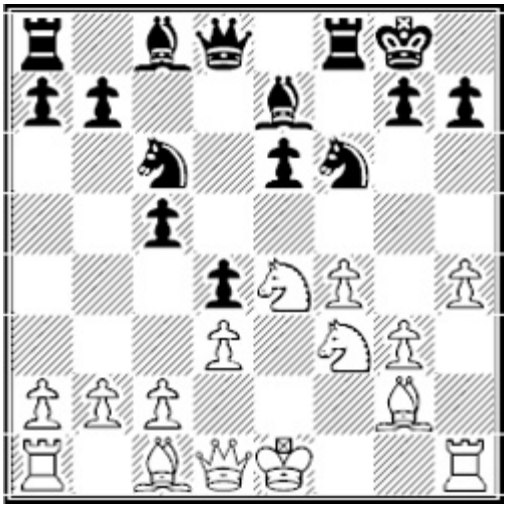
31...K×g7 32.Rg1+ Kh8 33.Qh6 Re7 34.Qf6+ Rg7 35.Q×g7 mate 1-0

Black's plan failed. All he managed to accomplish was to have seven seconds more than his opponent when he got mated.

Distractions

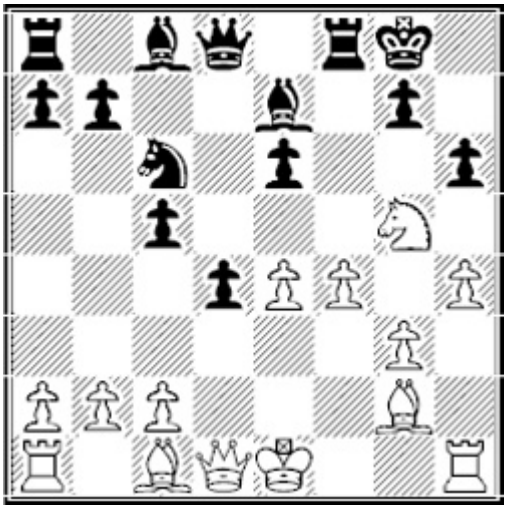
In the next game, White uses a different technique from the magician's bag of tricks. He offers a piece in such a way that Black can't help but be mesmerized by it.

White (1891) – Black (1902) [A00]



In this approximately equal position, Black has a slight advantage because he has played at an impressive pace, leaving him with 57 seconds to White's 51 seconds. White decides to counter this psychological strategy with some mind games of his own and sacrifices a piece.

12.Nfg5!? N×e4?! 13.d×e4!? h6



A natural reaction, anticipated by White, who just leaves his knight on g5 and dares Black to take it.

14.Bd2!?

The point of White's sacrifice isn't so much that it's sound (after 14...h×g5 15.h×g5 Qe8, White has compensation), but rather that Black will consume time and energy thinking about whether or not to accept the sacrifice.

White, on the other hand, has already written off his g5-knight and there is no question of moving it in the foreseeable future.

14...d3

Black took five seconds for this move.

15.c3 Bf6

Black took another five seconds for this move. We can surmise he was still thinking about whether to capture White's g5-knight.

16.e5 Be7

Here Black took seven seconds, perhaps now thinking about whether to sacrifice a piece on e5.

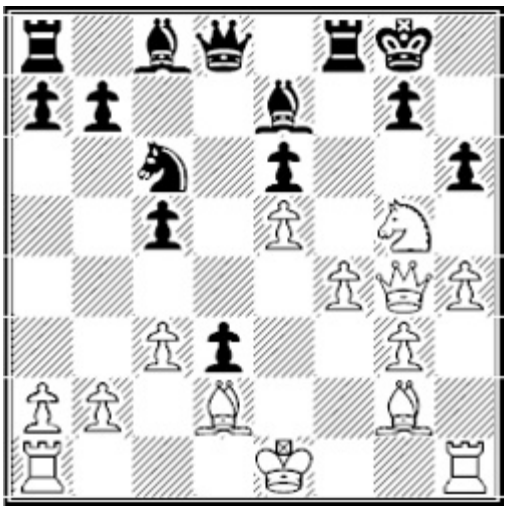
By this point, Black's threatening lead in time has dissipated while his position hasn't improved, all because of White's ingenious pseudo-sacrifice on move 14.

17.Qg4 ***(D)***

White continues to make moves that challenge Black to take White's g5-knight.

17...Qc7

White's strategy has worked well, as Black took ten seconds on this move, leaving him with only 28 seconds, against White's 41 seconds.



There is a certain irony in the fact that White has already gotten full value for his sacrificed piece – and Black hasn't even taken it yet!

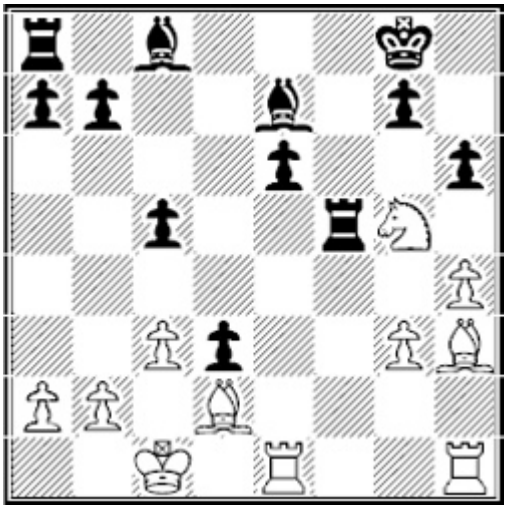
18.0-0-0 N×e5

Black cracks, but it’s hard to blame him since he is now worse on the board and on the clock.

19.f×e5 Q×e5 20.Rde1 Qf5

Black offers a trade of queens to stop an attack which never really started.

21.Q×f5 R×f5 22.Bh3



22.N×e6 was objectively stronger, but White’s knight has found a home on g5 and doesn’t want to leave.

22...h×g5

At last, but it’s much too late.

23.B×f5 Bf6 24.h×g5 1-0

Black resigned. White had a 12-second lead in time.

Kingwalks

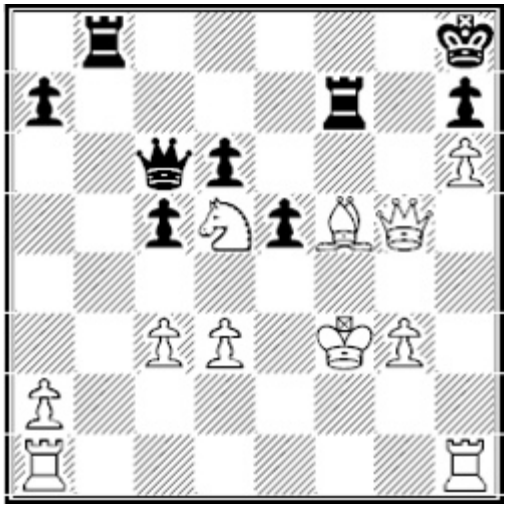
The most extreme form of distraction is the kingwalk, which involves deliberately sending your own king either across or up the board, inviting attack.

We have already seen some examples of kingwalks and the following games demonstrate just how effective they can be at disorienting the opponent, provided the ambulatory monarch doesn't get mated in the process.

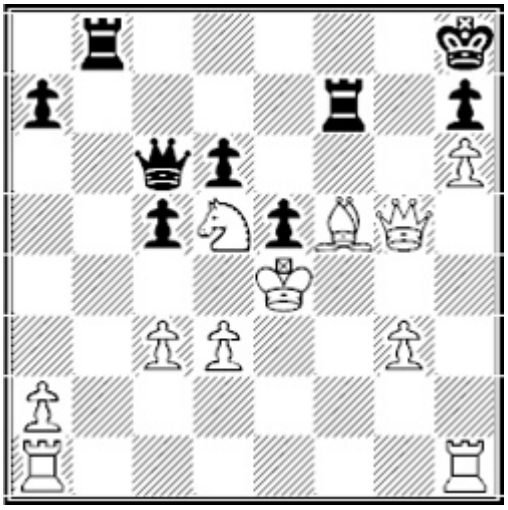
Our first example is a simple one.

White (2030) – Black (1917) [A00]

White has achieved a winning position out of a Closed Sicilian. Still, with White's king on the third rank and his d5-knight pinned and *en prise*, Black seems to have some counterplay, especially with White running short of time. White solves this problem ingeniously.



30.Ke4!



White’s king takes matters into his own hands and resolutely defends White’s d5-knight, at the same time unpinning White’s f5-bishop.

30...Rb2?

Black can’t resist launching an attack on White’s seemingly exposed king, but in doing so he forgets about his back rank weaknesses. So does White, but only for a moment.

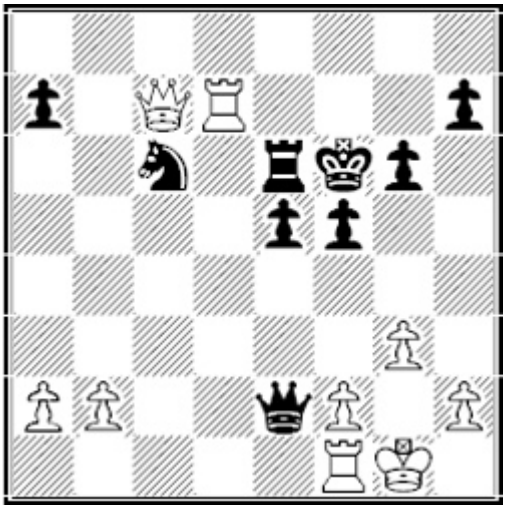
31.Rae1? c4? 32.Qd8+! Qe8 33.Q×e8+ Rf8 34.Q×f8 mate 1-0

The play in the next example is more complicated. The safety of Black’s king is very much an issue, at least initially.

White (1878) – Black (1948) [A10]

Black is behind in material (a clear exchange), position (his king is more exposed) and time (White has 32 seconds remaining; Black has 30 seconds).

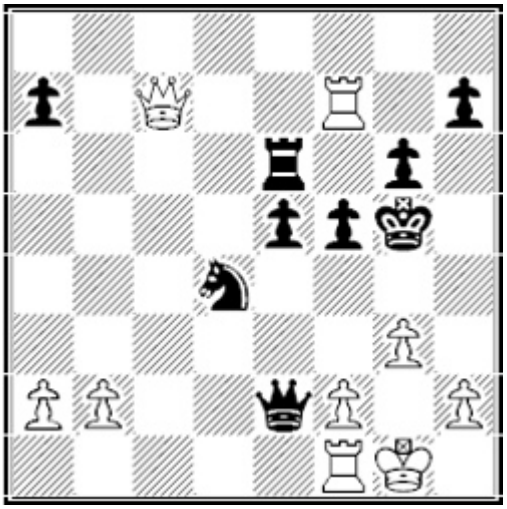
In a similar situation in World War I, Joffre attacked. Black does too.



23...Nd4!? 24.Rf7+?

White took only a second to give this check. He would have saved himself a lot of trouble had he found 24.Qd8+ Re7 25.Q×e7 mate.

24...Kg5



25.h4+?

Another near instantaneous move, and another mistake. White is still winning after 25.Qd8+ or 25.Qc1+.

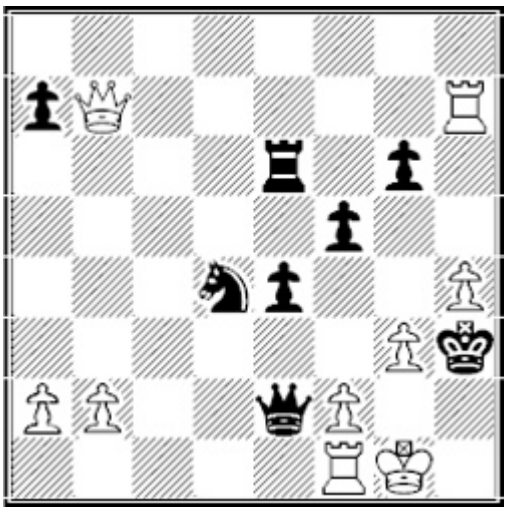
25...Kg4

Now the situation has changed radically. Black's king is not only safe but is playing an important role in Black's counterattack by infiltrating the light squares near White's king.

26.Qb7

White spent no less than 17 seconds on this move, but it's too late. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

26...e4 27.R×h7 Kh3



The culmination of Black's attack. The invasion by Black's king forces mate.

28.Rg7 Qf3 0-1

White decided to let his time run out.

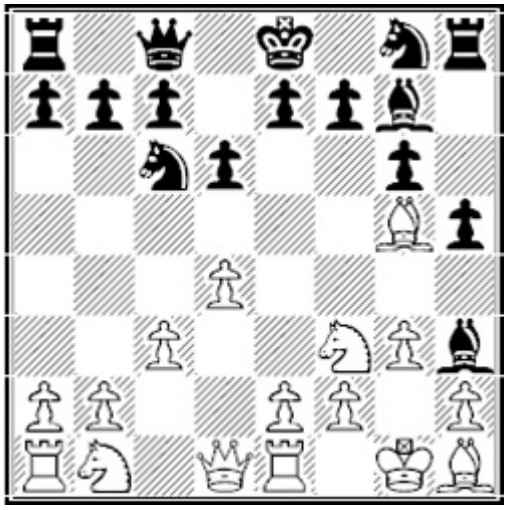
Our final example features another kingwalk, which is all the more impressive and dramatic for having been objectively unnecessary.

But that’s what bullet is all about! If you can’t indulge your chess fantasies in one-minute chess, where can you indulge them?

And since Black’s kingwalk succeeded, we shouldn’t be too critical.

White (2124) – Black (2134) [A40]

1.d4 g6 2.g3 Bg7 3.Bg2 d6 4.Nf3 Nc6 5.0-0 Bd7 6.c3 Qc8 7.Re1 Bh3 8.Bh1 h5 9.Bg5

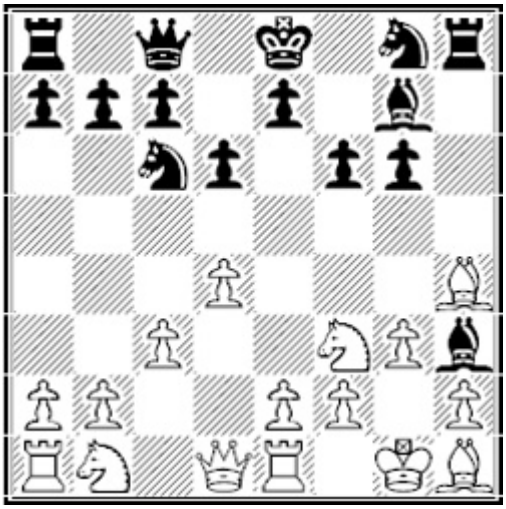


White stops 9...h4, but in bullet such moves are not so easily stopped.

9...h4!?

Objectively suspect, but it’s only a pawn, and White took four seconds on his response.

10.B×h4?! f6



After this move, Black has 52 seconds left and White has 48 seconds.

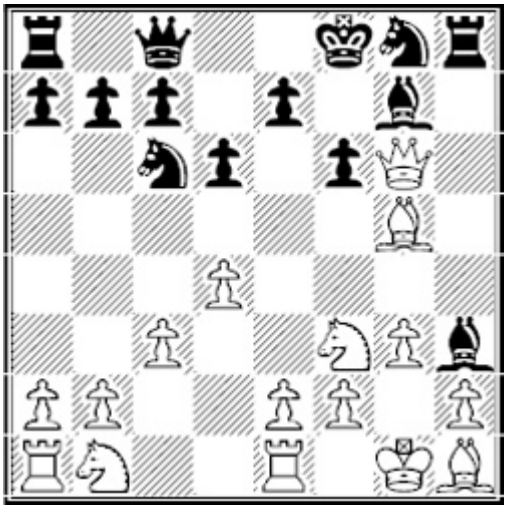
11.Qc2?!

White attacks Black's g6-pawn, which in bullet is an understandable reaction. The play now gets increasingly tricky.

11...g5!

Setting a trap.

12.Qg6+? Kf8 13.B×g5



White should have played 13.N×g5, when he winds up with three pawns for a piece and a slightly worse position. Now the trap is sprung.

13...Bf5!

We've seen this before – a backwards diagonal move traps White's queen. This is not only a classic example of the difficulty in seeing such moves, but it also illustrates the advantages of being familiar with piece patterns. Black probably wouldn't have seen this idea had he not been familiar with it.

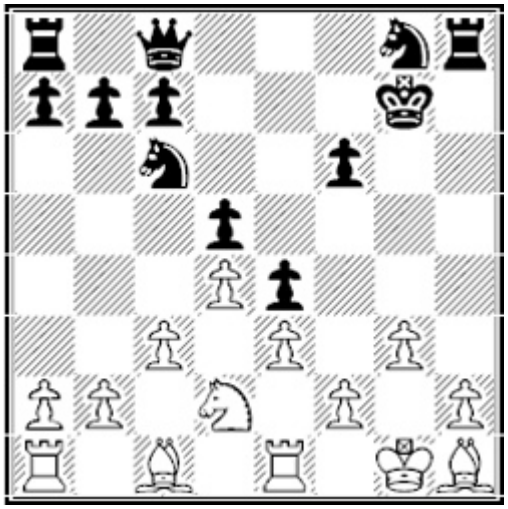
14.Q×g7+ K×g7

Black now has a winning material advantage and a five-second lead in time. But there is more interesting chess to come.

15.Bc1 Be4

15...e5 was probably the simplest way for Black to realize his advantage, but he is playing for a direct attack in the hope that White is psychologically weakened by the loss of his queen.

16.Nbd2 B×f3 17.N×f3 e5 18.e3 e4 19.Nd2 d5



Black tries to keep his center intact, rather than going after White's h2-pawn right away with 19...Qh3.

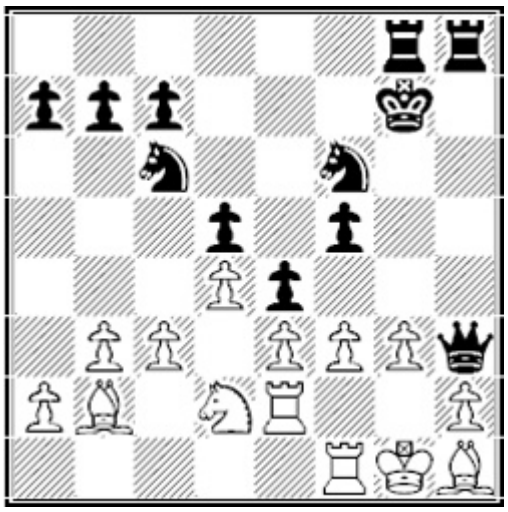
20.f3

White tries to weaken Black's center and create some room for his king, but this has the drawback of weakening White's king protection.

20...Qh3 21.Re2 f5 22.b3 Nf6 23.Bb2 Rag8

Rooks belong on open files! Black has arranged his pieces logically for the final attack and has kept his lead in time (35 seconds left to White's 30 seconds).

24.Rf1



24...Kg6?!

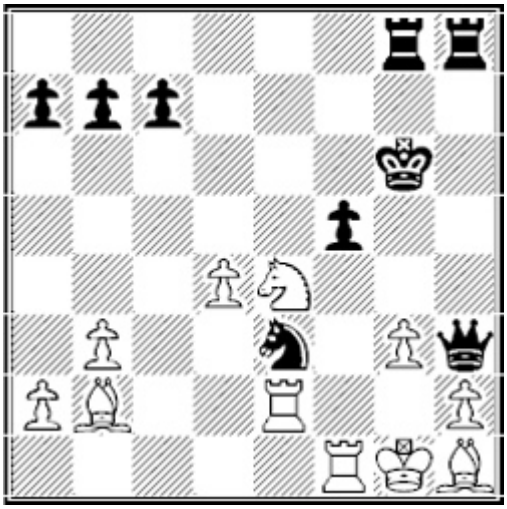
Black was torn between unmasking his g8-rook with 24...Kf7 and defending his f5-pawn and f6-knight with 24...Kg6, as played.

Since 24...Kf7 25.f×e4 R×g3+ 26.h×g3 Q×h1+ 27.Kf2 Qh2+ 28.Ke1 Q×g3+ 29.Kd1 f×e4 favors Black, 24...Kf7 was the right move.

25.c4 Ne7

Black still doesn't see that a rook sacrifice on g3 breaks through (25...Kf7!), so the game goes down a different path. Black's lead in time is down to three seconds.

26.c×d5 Ne×d5 27.f×e4 N×e4 28.N×e4 N×e3!?

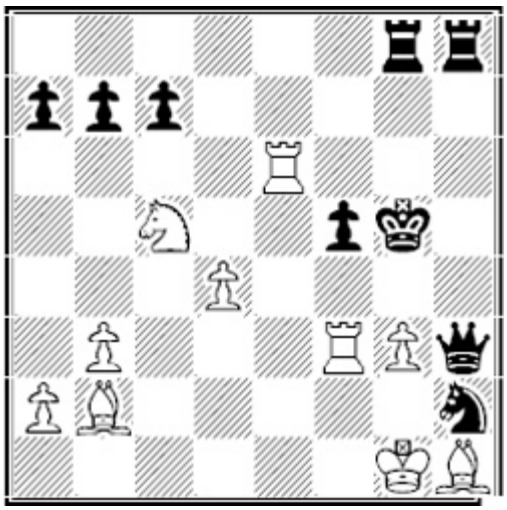


This was Black’s idea.

29.Rf3?! Ng4! 30.Nc5 N×h2 31.Re6+ Kg5!?

Black comes up with a demented idea which could have cost him the win, but

Black finally has managed to blast open the h-file, so White’s only hope lies in a counterattack.

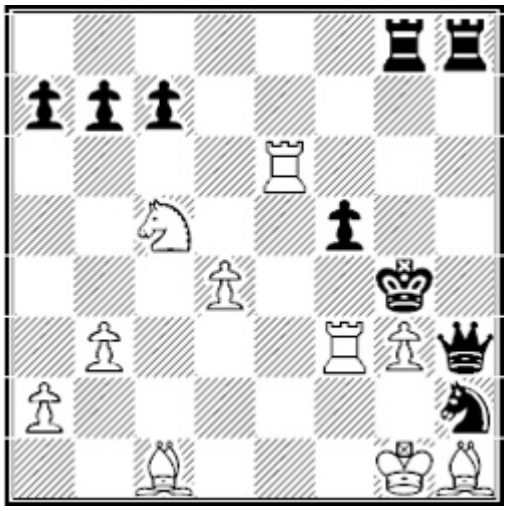


It so psychs out his opponent that it ends up leading to a pretty mate. The mundane 31...Kf7! won easily, but Black was enchanted by the idea of a kingwalk.

32.Bc1+?

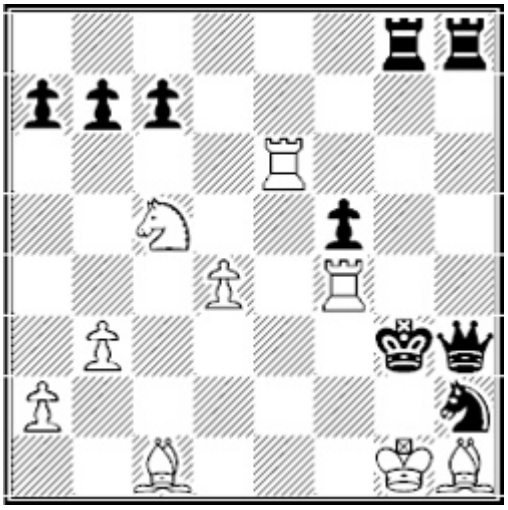
Black had assumed White would play this natural move, as indeed he did. But the surprising 32.Ne4+! f×e4 (32...Kh5 33.Bc1 Re8 is mind-boggling*)* 33.Bc1+ Kg4 34.R×e4+ Kh5 35.Re5+ Kg4 36.Re4+ led to near-equality. With each player having around 15 seconds left, anything could have happened.

32...Kg4



This is what Black had in mind. White has no good check.

33.Rf4+?! K×g3

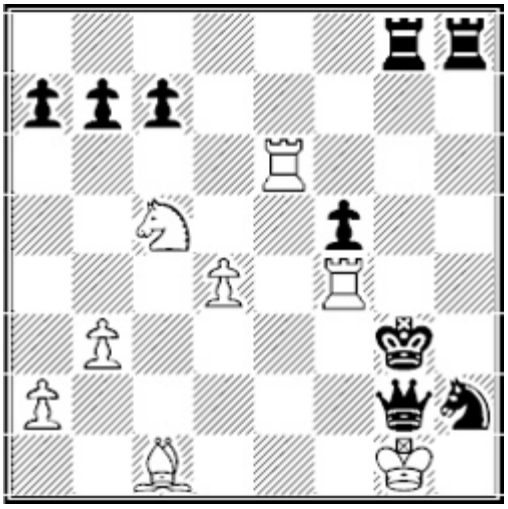


Anyone can attack with a rook or even a queen down an open file, but attacking with a king? That's something special...

34.Bg2

White is so disoriented by Black's unexpected kingwalk that he walks into a mate in one, perhaps because of an optical illusion that there was no threat on the g-file as long as Black's king blocked his g8-rook.

34...Q×g2 mate 0-1



Black’s kingwalk has led to a picturesque final position.

Chapter 17

Falling Apart

We know how stressful and tiring bullet chess can be. But it's stressful only if you let it be, and it's tiring only if you try too hard or play for too long. After all, bullet is supposed to be fun!

We've also seen that mistakes are common in bullet and that they can come in bunches. That shouldn't come as a surprise because the same thing often happens in normal chess. It's hard to say whether this is because mistakes lead to problems that are often difficult or impossible to solve, or because additional mistakes stem from the same flawed mental processes that led to the first mistake.

It's not really necessary to resolve this chicken-or-egg conundrum. It's enough to point out that in practice things can be worse than a series of even serious mistakes; at times, nothing seems to work. The bullet-induced combination of stress, fatigue and bad luck can be fatal to any player, and the consequences can be disastrous.

These horror shows are usually not the result of clever play but rather come about spontaneously. Playing well involves effort and thought and can cause your opponents all sorts of problems, but taking advantage of spontaneous collapses is more like an unearned run in baseball. We have used the term "falling apart" to describe the phenomenon where one player's position more or less disintegrates on its own. The other player then just has to pick up the pieces, literally.

The examples in this chapter have one thing in common. In all of them, things get much worse than just losing a piece or even stumbling into checkmate. Instead, the victim loses virtually everything, usually in rapid succession. Because it's bullet there sometimes isn't time to resign and so the punches keep landing long after a normal fight would be stopped by the referee. The results aren't pretty.

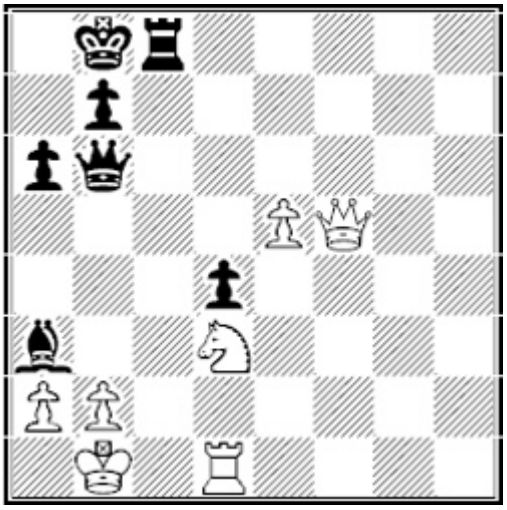
When we see players fall apart in this and other chapters, we are reminded that chess, and especially bullet chess, can be a difficult and cruel game. There is nothing wrong with resigning in bullet when you have a bad position and starting another game, and players often do. But when you see some of the awful things that happen to perfectly good positions it is tempting to play every game to the end. Almost any type of blunder is possible, sometimes for no discernable reason other than the general factors of time pressure and fatigue and the frailties of the human psyche.

This chapter is not for the faint hearted, but neither is bullet. Bullet players must learn to laugh at misfortune, especially their own. As Kipling wrote in *If*: *If you can meet with*
Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors
just the same;

Then (to paraphrase), you'll be a bullet player, my friend!

Our first example features a quick finish with little suffering.

White (2046) – Black (2013) [A00]

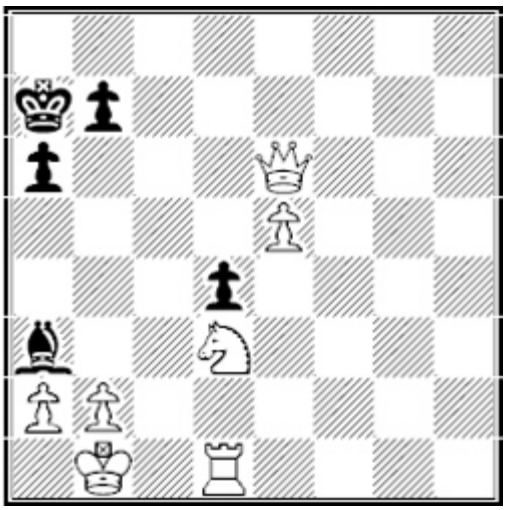


The position is equal, except that White has 32 seconds left to Black's 20 seconds. While Black has plenty of time, this time discrepancy may explain the following two moves.

33...Ka7? 34.Q×c8 Qe6!?

Maybe White won't see that his queen is attacked?

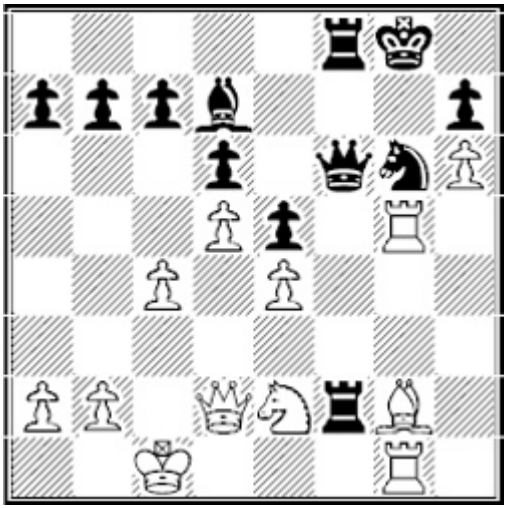
35.Q×e6 1-0



To paraphrase the Japanese Emperor at the end of World War II, “the situation has developed not necessarily to Black’s advantage.” Black resigned.

In the next example, the catastrophe is even greater.

White (1807) – Black (2001) [A40]

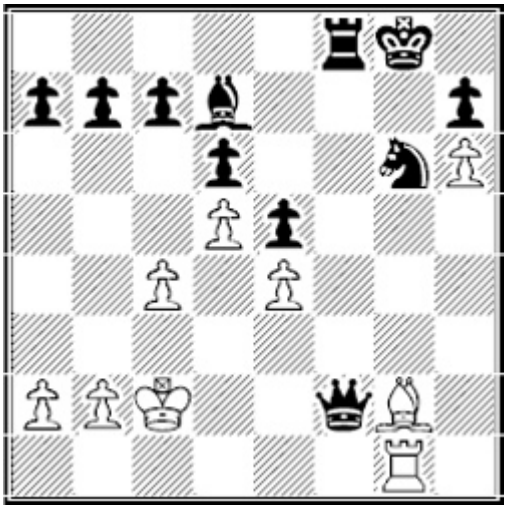


Black stands slightly better. After 25.Qe3, Black’s control of the f-file and his better bishop provide him with positional trumps, although White’s h6-pawn is annoying and potentially dangerous. Both players have 30 seconds left, so a tough second half of the game seems in store. But things can change quickly in bullet.

25.Ng3?

After seven seconds thought!

25...R×d2 26.K×d2 Q×g5+ 27.Kd3 Q×g3+ 28.Kc2 Qf2+ 0-1

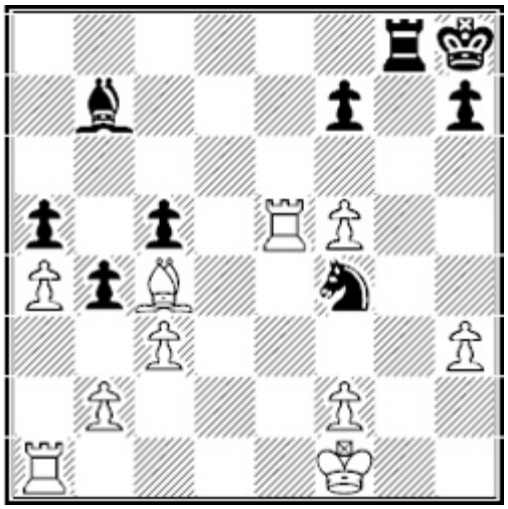


In the 20 seconds (and four moves) since the previous diagram, White has lost uncountable amounts of material and now resigned. His position didn't so much fall apart as it simply exploded.

The next example is more graphic because initially White is clearly winning in a simplified position, and just has to play normal moves in order to finish off his opponent.

But he sees a ghost, and the ghost becomes real.

White (2197) – Black (2064) [A40]



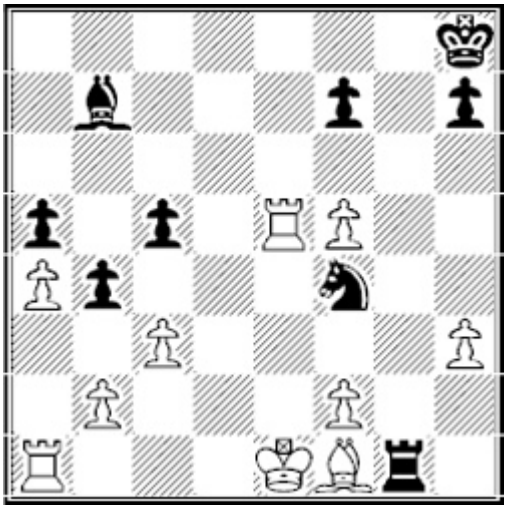
In an eventful game White unsoundly sacrificed a piece, after which Black hallucinated and blundered an entire rook, giving White a winning position.

Black has only phantom threats, and White can continue with the simple 30.c×b4 c×b4 31.R×a5. White also has a six-second time advantage (25 to 19 seconds remaining), but this is never a guarantee of anything in bullet.

30.Ke1?

White “defends” against a non-existent threat, giving Black real counterplay.

30...Rg1+ 31.Bf1?



This just makes things worse. White may have anticipated 31...Bg2 32.Kd2, but Black has better.

31...Nd3+!

Surprise! White loses his e5-rook, not his a1-rook. Despite being short of time, Black wisely took two seconds to find this move, since nothing short

of a decisive advantage will do.

32.Kd2 N×e5 33.Re1?

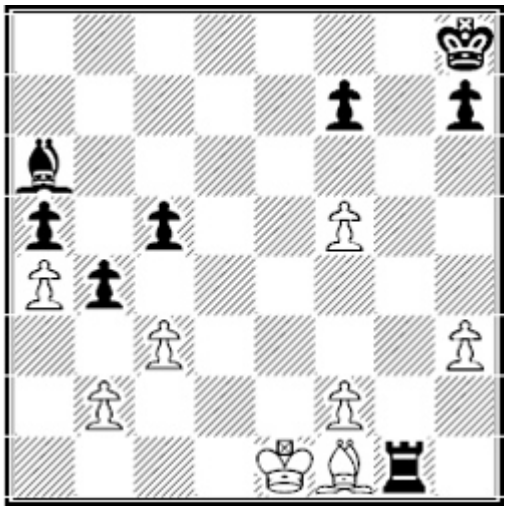
A characteristic of falling apart is that if something can go wrong, it will.

After 33.Rd1, Black would still be winning, but White would have a five-second lead in time and chances to resist. It would be difficult to predict the outcome of the game after 33.Rd1, because Black has no clear winning plan despite his extra piece.

33...Nf3+

Black's knight now demolishes the rest of White's position by capturing White's other rook, but even that doesn't stop the bleeding.

34.Ke2 N×e1 35.K×e1 Ba6

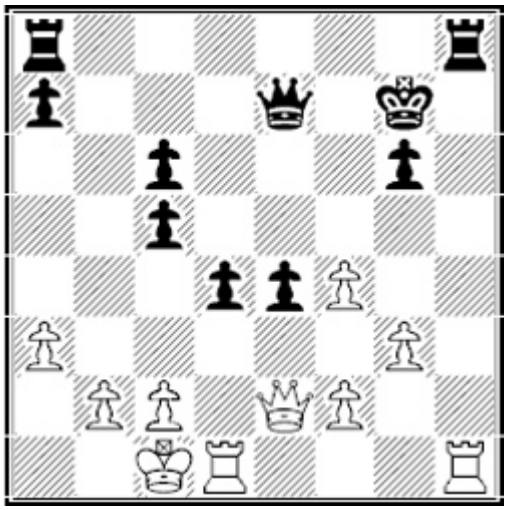


And now White's f1–bishop is lost as well, completing the tragedy.

36.c4 B×c4 37.Kd2 R×f1 0-1

In the following game, it’s Black’s pawns which pay the price.

White (2134) – Black (1965) [A00]



27.Qg4!

Objectively 27.Qg4! is the best move, but in bullet it’s even stronger than in normal chess as it creates threats both real and imagined against Black’s weakened kingside.

In the diagrammed position, White also has a lead in time (22 seconds remaining, against Black’s 16 seconds), so the initiative is even more important than usual. Little did White know that Black would now implode.

27...Qf6?

Black, unable to find a satisfactory continuation, took six seconds to find an unsatisfactory one.

28.Qd7+ Qf7 29.Q×c6

29.Qd6! was even better.

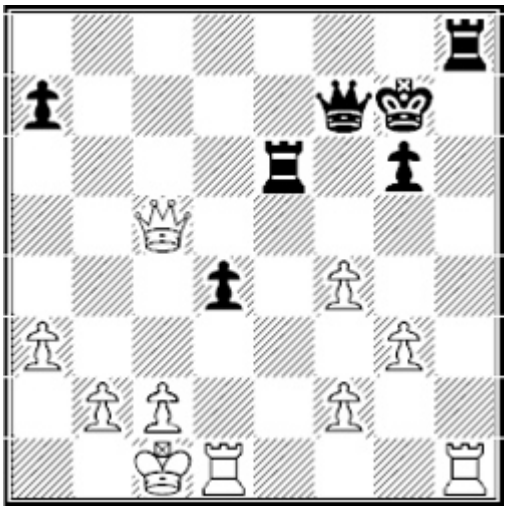
29...Rac8 30.Q×e4

White takes a second pawn. The theme of this example is beginning to take shape.

30...Rce8 31.Qc6 Re6

With less than 10 seconds left, down material and no counterplay, it is difficult for Black to find a useful plan.

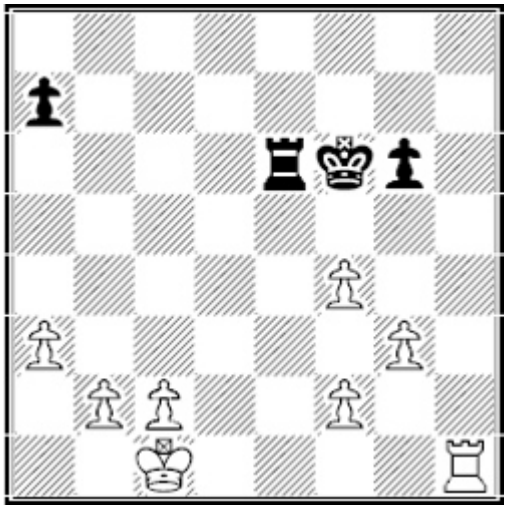
32.Q×c5



32...R×h1 33.Q×d4+!

Before recapturing on h1, White grabs another pawn.

33...Qf6 34.Q×f6+ K×f6 35.R×h1 ... 1-0



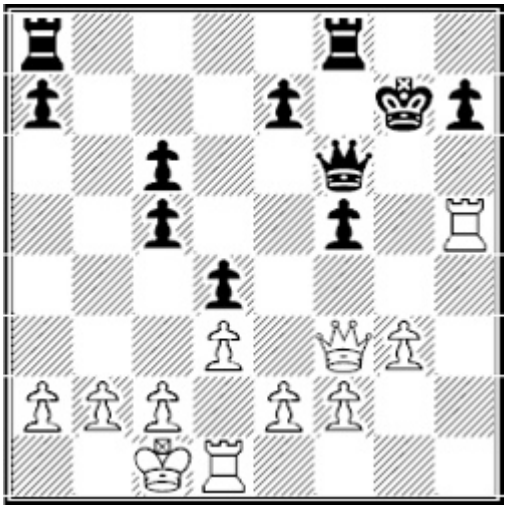
Black's center has been completely destroyed, and White has four extra pawns and a lead in time of 11 seconds to four seconds.

Black fought on valiantly and lost on time nine moves later.

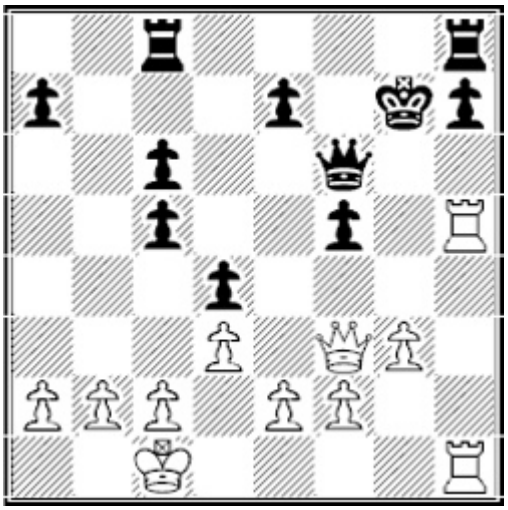
As a curious, slightly off-topic postscript to this game, here is the finish of an encounter between the same two players some eight months later. We have seen in an earlier chapter that it can be difficult to shake off programmed responses. The finale of the later game bears an eerie similarity to the finish in the previous example.

White (1987) – Black (2134) [A00]

White has a six-second lead in time (43 seconds remaining, to Black's 37 seconds). On the board, Black's weakened pawn structure creates the same kinds of problems as in the previous example, and White's major pieces are agile enough to exploit his opponent's difficulties.



19...Rh8 20.Rdh1 Rac8



Now White begins the harvest, but this time his target is his opponent's king.

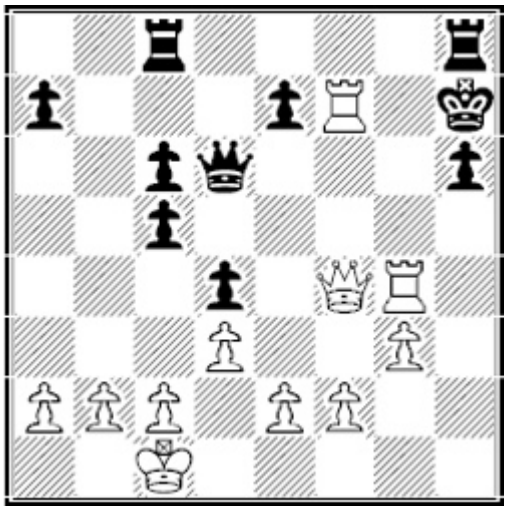
21.R×f5 Qg6 22.Qf4

22.Qe4! was even stronger.

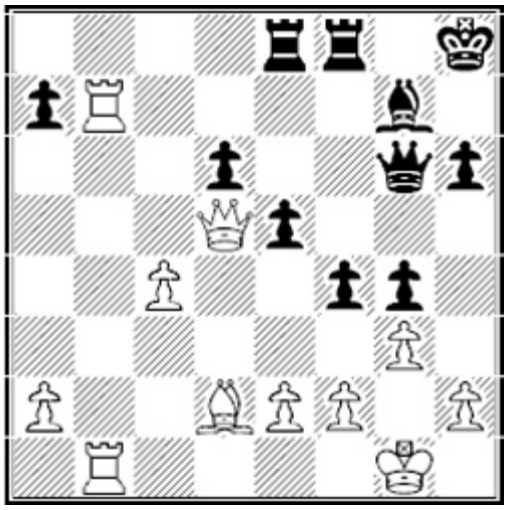
22...h6 23.Rh4! Qd6 24.Rg4+ Kh7 25.Rf7 mate 1-0 ***(D)***

White had a 20-second lead in time in the final position.

Our final example has everything. White stands better in the initial position, but in only four moves manages to lose both his rooks and, as a bonus, allow a mating attack.



White (2146) – Black (2022) [A00]



Thirty moves into a typical English Opening (or Closed Sicilian Reversed, if you prefer), White has a slight advantage on the board, but a serious disadvantage on the clock (18 seconds remaining to Black's 30 seconds).

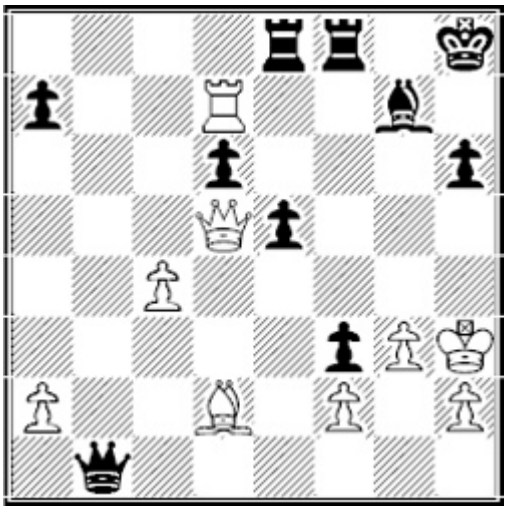
After 30.e4!, restricting the operation of Black's queen along the b1–h7 diagonal, the outcome would remain in doubt. It would be hard for Black to organize an attack, given the reduced material, and his weak pawns would soon begin to fall.

Instead White suffers a meltdown.

30.Rd7?

This seems like a logical move as it attacks Black's d6-pawn and prepares to double rooks on the seventh rank. But in fact it's a terrible blunder which loses by force. To begin with, White's b1-rook is hanging and Black happily takes it.

30...Q×b1+ 31.Kg2 f3+! 32.e×f3 g×f3+ 33.Kh3



33...Qf5+

Black couldn't resist making a point by going for White's other rook, but 33...Qg6!, playing for mate, was even stronger.

34.g4 Q×d7 0-1

What a change in less than ten seconds! 30.Rd7? turned out to be one of the least successful double-rook sacrifices in chess history.

Chapter 18

Knowing When to Stop

Playing bullet chess is like eating potato chips. Both can be hard to stop, and for some of the same reasons. Both are fun, and there is always room (or time) for one more. But, as with so many things, it’s important to know when to stop.

One reason bullet can be addictive is that bullet games take so little time. What’s another two minutes, in the grand scheme of things? Just as one more potato chip won’t make you fat, one more bullet game can’t hurt, can it? Or two? Or three...?

It’s also hard to know exactly when to call it a day. If you end a bullet session with a loss, you may find yourself thinking of that game until you next play. Conversely, if you just won a game, can you really break what might be the start of a big winning streak? Since there aren’t many draws in bullet, this dilemma alone can keep you playing much longer than you intended.

The underlying source of the problem, though, is that bullet is fun. As we’ve seen, the games often are exciting and unusual, and even if your last game was a disappointing loss, your next game might be a work of art. Bullet has its ups and downs, and so when someone sits down at their computer to play bullet, they rarely intend to play only one or two games. They settle in for an hour or two or three of relaxing diversion. But how often do people play more games than they planned to, or than they should?

At this point, some readers might be wondering whether any of this matters. Can bullet chess be bad for you? In the next, and final, chapter we will consider how bullet can help or hurt your chess, but what about the rest of you? Is there such a thing as too much bullet?

Our answer is unequivocally “yes.” Almost anything, taken to excess, can be bad, and bullet chess is no exception. First let’s look at the signs that you’ve played too long, and then we’ll suggest a few strategies for avoiding excessively long bullet sessions.

Signs it’s time to stop

Here is a far from exhaustive list of signs that you’ve played too much bullet and should take a break:

- you are playing much more slowly than normal and find yourself losing on time by 15 or 20 seconds for no apparent reason.
- you are missing obvious mates, both by failing to mate your opponents and by falling into them yourself.
- you are overlooking one- or two-move tactics that you never have trouble seeing.
- the pieces don’t make much sense to you, so you are having trouble seeing that rooks move along ranks and files, bishops move along diagonals, and so on.
- you make careless pre-moves that you normally wouldn’t make.

- you find yourself getting frustrated or angry with your opponents for playing on in lost positions, and with yourself for being unable to beat them when they do.
- wins don't give you a sense of joy, but only a feeling of relief.
- your head hurts.

When one or more of these symptoms appears, it might be time for a break. Sometimes a few minutes might be enough, and after some deep breaths and a snack, you might be ready to go. But maybe not...

In Chapter 3 ("Time") we discussed the "move count." You can also have a "game count," which is the number of bullet games you can play before your brain starts to give out on you. This can also be measured simply in terms of time – if you know that after two hours your play starts to seriously deteriorate, along with your own well-being, then don't plan on a four-hour session.

It's not only your play, of course. If you find that a three-hour session leaves your head spinning and makes it impossible to sleep afterwards, so that you're wrecked the next day, you should stop sooner. Sometimes after overly long bullet sessions players can not only feel tired and irritable, but also angry with themselves because they have wasted several hours when they know they should have been doing something else. It's one thing to dislike a weak pawn or a badly placed minor piece, but bullet should never lead to self-loathing.

None of this sounds like rocket science, does it? But even bullet players who are aware of all these things play longer than they know they should

and then regret it. At a certain point, too much bullet chess can lead to some of the same problems as other addictions.

Strategies for stopping

We're not suggesting that chessplayers should give up or avoid bullet chess – just the opposite! But no one should play bullet because they *have* to; they should play bullet because they *want* to.

Most of all, you should always be able to stop before things go too far and bullet is no longer fun. To this end, here are some useful ideas to solve this potential problem. Which approach works for any particular player in any specific situation will vary:

- set a deadline and stick to it. If you can only play until 7 pm, make that a definite stopping point and don't cheat by playing "just a few more." By setting a deadline at the start of the session, you can ensure that your stopping point doesn't depend on whether you happen to win or lose the last few games.

- stop when your rating hits a certain upper or lower limit. Bullet ratings don't matter much, and if your self-worth depends on your bullet rating, that's a very bad sign, But bullet ratings have their uses, and one is to help determine your stopping point. If you are rated 1950 set a goal of 2000, with the proviso that if you drop below 1900, you'll stop. Bullet ratings change quickly, and either way you'll get back to where you should be in the next session.

- commit to stopping on your next bad loss. One way to do this is to stop when you next lose to someone with a lower rating. This is arbitrary

(that player may be someone who has played too long and dropped a hundred rating points!), but won't leave you with a sense that you're leaving great games unplayed if you stop.

- play with a friend and "give up the chair" when you start losing it. It's just as much fun (and maybe more) to kibitz, and taking a break while your friend plays can be a great way to have an entire evening of bullet fun without frying your brain.

Most of all, know yourself

The most important thing is to know yourself and your limits, and to understand why you play bullet chess. One of the main themes of this book is that bullet is entertaining because it exposes the foibles of the players and it's fun. If you play bullet for any reason other than that bullet's a laugh a minute and you like it, you might want to give the question some thought.

The problems set out above won't arise and the coping mechanisms we describe won't be needed if you have the right sense of balance and simply know when it's time to stop.

This is not to say that you might not want to continue a bullet session when you're tired or playing poorly, if only because in competitive tournament chess (if that's your thing) players often have to tough out adversity. And of course bad patches in bullet sessions are completely normal. By all means keep on playing, but make sure it's a conscious, deliberate decision, rather than the result of an unhealthy compulsion to play.

The idea of using bullet chess for training purposes raises an interesting question which we will deal with in the next, and final, chapter. Can bullet

chess actually be useful? We think so, but quite apart from that, it’s a wonderful way to waste time. In the modern world, with its stresses and insistence on doing everything faster, quality time-wasting is greatly underrated. Paradoxically, bullet chess can help restore the balance.

Chapter 19

Lessons from Bullet

Unless you started at the last chapter of this book, you have by now learned a lot about bullet chess. The speed and depth of your bullet play should be impressing your friends and frightening your enemies. But is there more to bullet than just bullet? Are there lessons to be learned that apply to other time controls and activities?

Other time controls

One-minute chess is probably the fastest chess can be played and still be even semi-rational (braggarts will claim otherwise, and they sometimes might even be right). There is no point in discussing faster time controls, though, because one-minute games turn into 45-second games, then 30-second games, and so on. All the principles and insights we have shared in this book apply to time controls of less than a minute, should anyone be crazy enough to try to play at that speed.

We will therefore look only at slower time controls.

Increments

One popular form of blitz chess involves increments. In most versions, each player starts with some time (say a minute) and gets an additional amount of time (perhaps two seconds) each time a move is made. For convenience, we will refer to this time control as 1/2. 2/3 would mean that each player starts with two minutes and gets three seconds per move; 3/3 would mean

each player starts with three minutes and gets three seconds per move, and so on.

The fastest incremental time control is probably 0/1, which translates to 10 seconds to start, plus one second per move. 0/1 is bullet on amphetamines, and the slightest hesitation can be fatal. We don't recommend it.

1/1 is more common, and there are very significant differences between 1/1 and bullet. Clearly you have to play quickly at both time controls, but the one-second increment is critical in many situations.

If we assume the average game is 40 moves long, 1/1 translates to one minute and forty seconds for each player, which is close to the leisurely pace of two minutes each (more about that in a moment). With more time, many of the observations we have made about the relationship between time and the on-board position lose their force, at least in the early part of the game. More importantly, with even a one-second increment, a good player can rebuild his position on the clock by moving in less than a second.

This may sound a bit far-fetched, but keep in mind that a pre-move takes only one-tenth of a second, and therefore if one player achieves a winning position where the opponent has no counterplay, that player can just pre-move in order to gain enough time to win. Similarly, playing irrational, sacrificial moves in order to run your opponent out of time simply doesn't work when playing with increments. It can be quite funny to watch someone used to playing one-minute games try this in a game with increments.

Two-minute chess

While two-minute games are still fast, they are noticeably slower than one-minute games. This means they are that much more likely to be decided on the board, rather than by time.

Perhaps the biggest difference between bullet and two-minute chess is that unsound tactical tricks are much more likely to fail in two-minute chess. The defender is more likely to have enough time to see through a trap, and will also have more time afterwards to exploit the resulting on-board advantage. The initiative is still important in two-minute games, but the slower time control brings with it an unfortunate need for sounder play.

Of course time is still important in two-minute chess because two minutes is not all that long! Having a time advantage is important, although if it comes at the expense of your position, this can be a bad deal in two-minute chess. That said, few two-minute games are decided before the players use up at least half of their allotted time, which means two-minute games tend to turn into bullet games at some point. Whether this happens after ten or 15 moves or later on depends, but in most games the players will end up playing bullet.

When this happens, all the lessons in this book come into play. The player who can go into “bullet mode” as time grows short will have a huge advantage, especially since many players who play two-minute chess tend to stay away from bullet.

Three-minute chess

Three minute chess is extremely popular and all but the most serious tournament players likely play at that time control from time to time. The comments made above in relation to two-minute chess all apply to three-

minute chess as well. Because time is less of a factor, there is an increased premium on good play, although often the result is to cause the opponent to run short of time rather than to win outright on the board.

Three-minute chess is probably the fastest time control which provides a reasonable opportunity for players to practice “real openings.” It goes without saying that thinking too long in the opening can be costly in three-minute chess, but one or even two minutes spent on the opening can be a good investment if the result is a clearly winning position. After all, if you can play an entire game in a minute, finishing off your opponent should be no trouble! Three-minute chess gives the players time to remember theoretical variations and even try new moves.

Five-minute chess

This brings us to five-minute or “blitz” chess. This is the traditional time control for speed chess, and only recently has it been somewhat superseded by three-minute chess. For bullet players, five minutes seems like an eternity, and a significant adjustment is required to go from one rate of play to the other. No points are awarded for losing a blitz game in less than a minute!

Bullet players will rarely run short of time in blitz chess. Bullet chess is like training with a medicine ball or shooting a hockey puck full of lead. Whether a bullet player can slow down sufficiently to think enough to play blitz chess is another question. In fact, the real danger for bullet players is boredom. As their attention span becomes attuned to one-minute games, it may become difficult for some bullet players to maintain their concentration for as long as ten minutes.

Whether this is really a “problem” depends in part on whether the bullet players in question care whether their blitz chess suffers from their greater interest in bullet. Being aware of this potential danger and keeping an open mind as to the different attractions of blitz chess will allow most bullet players to play equally well at any time control. Versatility is always a good thing!

Tournament chess

The patriarch of Soviet Chess, Mikhail Botvinnik, forbade his pupils from playing five-minute chess. His view was that playing chess at that speed was not chess at all and that blitz was a vice which would lead to superficial play. Losing world championship matches to Tal and Petrosian, who were both outstanding blitz players, must have galled him. And let’s not even talk about Bobby Fischer, who often won blitz games using less than two minutes...

Botvinnik’s views on bullet chess can only be imagined, as one-minute chess really only came of age in the internet era. Prejudices aside, though, it’s fair to ask whether bullet helps or hurts one’s “real” chess. This question won’t arise for many bullet players, who have no interest in spending a weekend or longer playing in a chess tournament, and who can’t even imagine spending four or five hours on a single game. But there are also players who play bullet for fun and relaxation, and play tournament chess for the challenge, the social aspects, to get out of the house, to boost their ego or even because they just love the game. Will bullet ruin their chess?

The main concern is that bullet play leads to superficiality and an irresistible temptation to play for tricks. There is something to this, although our view is that this anxiety is unjustified if bullet players simply realize

that bullet chess and normal, tournament chess are quite different animals. Tactics and strategies that work in bullet chess will often fail in normal chess, and vice versa.

It might not be wise to play several hours of bullet in between rounds of a tournament (although some people do), but this may be more because of fatigue than because bullet is inherently bad for your chess. For most players, it is enough to allow for a period of adjustment before a serious tournament – take a little time off from bullet and let your brain slow down a bit.

Some players find it relaxing to play blitz or even bullet before and during more serious events. Fast play also helps some players warm up for their slower tournament games. If you find that some bullet gets you in the right frame of mind to grind out your opponent in a double-rook ending at a club match or in a weekend tournament, go for it.

So much for the possible negative effects of bullet – what about the benefits? To put this question in perspective, we first will take a brief look at the state of competitive chess, and the increasing importance of rapid play in the modern chess world.

Mistakes

It has often been said that “chess is a game of mistakes.” Without mistakes, chess is a draw, and usually a boring draw at that. In days of old, when there was much to discover about chess, the mistakes came of their own accord, but as the “science” of chess has developed, mistakes have become less common. Some argue that this means the level of play has improved, while others feel that from the competitive standpoint the best days of chess are

behind us, even to the extent that serious changes to chess (such as the addition of new pieces) are necessary to save the game.

Regardless of where you stand on these issues, the fact remains that mistakes are necessary for chess to work, and people have given a lot of thought as to how to induce these mistakes.

One is to reward risk taking, so that the payoff for taking chances and playing to win makes the occasional loss acceptable. This has led to some organizers awarding one point to each player for a draw, but three points for a win. Whether this will catch on is hard to say. This type of scoring system is used in football (soccer in North America), giving wins a greater importance than ties.

Another approach is to consider a draw only a starting point, with the players contesting the full point in a playoff or overtime game. One interesting idea is to have a draw worth only one-third of a point to each player, with the remaining one-third of a point being decided by a rematch, with colors reversed, using whatever time remains on the clocks. If the first overtime game is drawn, the players switch colors again and keep playing until finally one player wins. The player who had more time left when the initial game was drawn would have an advantage in overtime. If increments are used, the players would always have some time for the overtime game(s), but a superiority in fast play would clearly be an advantage (especially if the increments were reduced or eliminated at some point).

In many elimination tournaments, the same type of system is used. The players contest two or more normal games, with a slow time control. If the players are tied, two rapid games (usually 20 minutes with increments) are played. If that doesn’t do it, blitz games are played. Ultimately an

“Armageddon” game may be played, where White has more time but Black must win.

Many sports use overtime to decide the outcome of close matches. Tennis has tie breaks, baseball has extra innings, and hockey has a five-minute overtime period (with only four skaters for each team), followed by a shootout (soccer also uses this approach).

In these systems, and many others, competitive results will often depend on the abilities of the players to play some form of speed chess. The psychological benefits of bullet expertise should not be underestimated. If you are comfortable in your blitz and bullet play, you need not fear playoff or overtime games, and may even welcome them. Conversely, an opponent who knows you are a blitz or bullet specialist may try too hard to win in “regulation time” and no fast games may be needed. In chess, the threat is often more important than the execution!

But there’s more...

Time trouble

One current trend in chess, besides the use of different forms of playoff or overtime games with increasingly fast time controls, is to also speed up the rate of play in the tournament games themselves.

Many top players have rebelled against this approach, criticizing it as a mere convenience for organizers which reduces the quality of play, especially in endings, where players are forced to try to solve difficult problems with only 30 seconds per move. These criticisms are not unreasonable – it’s fair to ask whether extended playing sessions with faster

time controls is really chess. But it’s also fair to ask whether extensive memorization of computer-checked openings and middle game positions is really chess. Faster time controls may make it easier for organizers, but to criticize them because they cause players to make mistakes misses the point – that’s one of the main ideas!

Historically tournament games were replete with opening preparation, deep thought, subtle plans and complicated tactics. They were also often decided in time scrambles, where one or both players had used almost all their allotted time and were forced to move quickly. Blunders followed, and the outcome of the game was determined in two or three minutes.

The trend to faster time controls makes time scrambles even more common, and it is here that bullet can give players a real edge. In games without increments, even a sedate tournament game may end up as a bullet game, and then the principles we’ve discussed in the preceding chapters may apply. Bullet players’ nerves will hold up well once the players have less than a minute left, as they will be in familiar territory. In contrast, serious tournament players are more likely to get rattled in time trouble, thinking that two or three minutes can’t possibly be enough time to play chess. We know better!

Conclusion

Bullet chess stands on its own as a perfectly valid, fun form of chess. It can hone your tactical skills, improve your strategic judgment, take your mind off a long day at work and give you a headache. Most of all, it’s fun.

The criticism that “bullet wrecks your chess” comes mainly from people who don’t (and often can’t) play it. In reality bullet can improve your

results in competitive tournaments, both in time scrambles (including by avoiding them!) and in playoff games.

Now go play some bullet!

Chapter 20

Bullet Principles

The discerning reader will have noticed that in this book, hidden in plain sight, are a number of principles which set out the essence of bullet chess.

The industrious reader will have taken out his or her notebook and carefully listed these principles for repeated study.

The patient reader will have read to the very end of this book and will therefore not have to bother listing the principles, because we will save you the trouble.

1. Winning on time is as honorable as winning on the board.

To misquote Dante “Abandon Pride, all ye who enter here.” Players who think that winning on the board somehow means more than winning on time will have a hard time playing bullet. If a player thinks that losing on time is acceptable, that’s just what will happen all too often. Leave your pride at the tournament hall, and accept that the bullet rules are right – checkmate or time decides the game, and it doesn’t matter which way you win or lose.

2. Time is money.

In bullet all those wonderful and valid chess principles that we know (or should know) and love (or ignore) are only a means to an end, and the end is winning. Sure, it’s great to have a big material advantage, and if weakening your opponent’s pawn structure or having the bishop pair makes

you happy, go for it. Happy players play faster and better. But in the end, if your principled play doesn't force mate or run your opponent out of time, it doesn't matter. So don't hesitate to trade material or other advantages for time, or vice versa. Ultimately you have to convert whatever currency you are using into a win, or else it's all just show.

3. Post-mortems are for losers.

Sound play is great if it works, but otherwise who really cares? Constant, relentless strategic or tactical pressure usually wears down your opponent, leading to an increasing time or positional advantage. But "unsound" traps and tricks can work too, if they are used at the right psychological moment. When your opponent loses and points out the refutation, you can smile sweetly.

4. The initiative is crucial in bullet.

Usually this involves a direct attack on the opponent's king, although the initiative can take many forms. Almost any kind of threat will do, as it is harder for most players to defend than to attack. Keep in mind, however, that unexpected moves are also hard to meet, so it may well be better to hold an obvious threat in reserve in order to confuse your opponent. Because defending takes time, it is often worth giving up at least some material in order to seize the initiative and create threats. This is even true in the opening, as the opponent may either overlook the threats or fall fatally behind on time. In the middlegame, confronting your opponent with difficult, irrevocable positional decisions may flummox him or her. In the endgame, direct attacks can save time and may be the best – or even the only – way to convert an advantage.

5. If you're winning, don't pick a fight.

If you are ahead on time and on position, the game is yours to lose. Don't try to be a hero and win brilliantly (see point 1, above) – just play quickly and let nature take its course. Care is always required in bullet, as no position is so good it can't be wrecked.

6. If you're losing, fight on!

Conversely, if you're losing, don't resign. Anything can happen in bullet, and until you are mated, there's hope. Keep the possibility of counterplay alive by avoiding exchanges if possible and especially by avoiding checkmate!

7. When the position is balanced, play quickly and consistently.

Bullet games are volatile, and often it is possible to say that one player is clearly winning or losing. But in between are those unclear or balanced positions where you "just have to play chess." In bullet, "just playing chess" means playing finding a plan and playing quickly. Don't think deeply in non-critical positions, trying to discover positional nuances that will impress your friends and frighten your enemies, and never, ever get emotionally involved in the position! There just isn't time for a serious relationship!

8. Have fun.

We keep coming back to this, don't we? Your ego should not be tied to your bullet rating, and one good (undeserved?) win should balance several losses. Bullet is art, and while in one sense winning is all that matters, the

imperfections in the game allow for wins which you could never hope to see in tournament chess. Bullet games can be beautiful, in their own way.

A word on etiquette

We now turn to the delicate subject of bullet etiquette. Since bullet is supposed to be fun, it's difficult to understand why some people get upset about it. It may be the frustration of making mistakes, but that's what bullet it all about. Here are some "do's" and "don't's" of bullet etiquette:

- Don't get mad when you lose. Mistakes are part of bullet – be glad you can contribute.

- If you do get mad, don't show it. You're on the internet – it's up to you whether you send a pointlessly nasty message or not. Don't! Bullet gives people who aren't classy a unique opportunity to act like they are. An immediate challenge to a rematch is a sign of anger.

- Don't disconnect and forfeit. Just resign if you want to. Don't make your opponent wait.

- Don't feel obliged to give an opponent a rematch, and don't get mad if your opponent declines to play again. He or she might be busy or have to go for some reason.

- Never disparage an opponent. Anyone who plays bullet deserves your respect.

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